STANDPOINTS

SUPERSTITION

by

HERBERT THURSTON

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STANDPOINTS

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SUPERSTITION

A Backward Glance over Nineteen Centuries

By

HERBERT THURSTON

S.J.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

"STANDPOINTS," the word which has been chosen as a general title for this series, is an accurate expression of its scope and purpose. The contributors share the common conviction that, in a time of intellectual and ethical uncertainty, nothing will more promote the cause of genuinely Christian progress than the frank expression of personal points of view, put forward as theses for discussion and criticism. It is by this dialectical process of question and answer, argument and counter-argument, and by this process alone, that the truth will ultimately be dissociated from the half-truths which surround it, and placed upon a secure foundation of its own.

With this end in view, no editorial compulsion of any kind has been exercised over the various writers. Each speaks for himself alone, committing neither his publisher, his editor, nor his fellow-contributors to the series, in any way whatever. What binds the writers together is simply the claim which each makes for himself, and allows for the others, that the "standpoints" expressed are void of irrational bias and prejudice, and have been reached after serious enquiry, in which sympathetic attention has been given not least of all

to the arguments of those schools of thought from which the writer has found himself in the end compelled to differ. If the same sympathetic attention is given by the reader to what is here written, the purpose of the series will have been secured.

K. E. KIRK.

INTRODUCTION

THE subject dealt with in this little book of necessity involves some discussion of past history. Superstition is so largely a relative term that it cannot be treated in the abstract as one might treat such questions as suicide, or alcoholism, or birth-control, or slavery. That superstition is a serious evil no one will deny, but the measure of its wrongfulness and of the mischief it causes depends upon many conditions. It may appear to some readers that the pages which follow are more of an apology than an indictment. I can only plead that in the *Dialogue concerninge Heresyes and Matters of Religion* of that supremely wise and high-principled Christian, the Blessed Sir Thomas More, an even more tolerant presentment of many similar abuses is set out, and, as I think, with much force of logic; I have not attempted to provide any bibliography. The field is too vast. But almost all Folk-Lore treatises and periodicals supply abundant illustrations of such credulities as are here in question. The long series of volumes of *Notes and Queries*, or the still unfinished *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* by Bächtold and Stäubli may be recommended to the notice of any inquirer who desires to obtain some idea of the myriad forms in which

superstition manifests itself. The *Golden Bough* and other writings of Sir James G. Frazer are also a great storehouse of data, dealing more especially with savage peoples, but there are many critics who, like the late Mr. Andrew Lang, question not only the reliability of many of Frazer's alleged facts, but still more the interpretations he so confidently attaches to them.

It may be well to add that, when speaking in Chapter IV of "the mischief of credulity," I have no intention of denouncing the veneration of spurious relics as necessarily superstitious. Such relics may be, and in most cases are, exposed and venerated in perfect good faith. God is not offended by a material error inculpably committed. But credulity, if unchecked, produces a habit of mind which leads imperceptibly to such gross abuses as are illustrated on page 90 and page 95 of the chapter referred to.

HERBERT THURSTON, S.J.

June 30, 1933.

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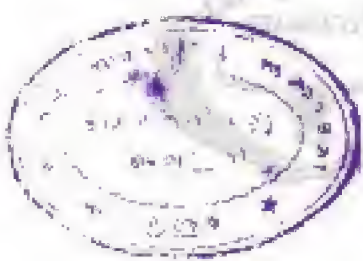

SUPERSTITION

CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF SUPERSTITION

SOMEONE has more or less cynically professed to discover a derivation for the word superstition in the fact that it is the one element of religion which will be found to have survived (*superstiterit*) all creeds, philosophies and forms of worship however long they endure. No doubt the editors of the *New English Dictionary* are right in refusing to treat the suggestion seriously. None the less it must be owned that there is nothing more remarkable about superstition than its persistence, even though this fact may have little to do with the etymology of the word by which it is named. It is not enough to say that superstition dies hard. Superstition can never die so long as the human race is subject to manifold infirmities of mind and body and has neither uniformity nor consistency in its beliefs. In the ultimate analysis superstition is the perversion of an instinct which lies deep in man's nature, and which, according to the particular point of view, has been variously regarded as the noblest and the most abject of human faculties. For the Christian believer the religious sense is something infinitely

to be prized. It opens the mind to the influence of the highest ideals; it is the foundation of all such virtues as fortitude, purity, truth, loyalty, brotherly love and respect for legitimate authority. When Christ our Lord so repeatedly commended "faith," and enjoined a humility which should be docile as the heart of a child, He undoubtedly appealed to this instinct. He was not speaking to the Pharisees, but to His own disciples, when He said (Matt. xviii. 3–4, R.V.): "Verily I say unto you, except you turn and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Assuredly this is not a commendation of superstition, but it is a commendation of an attitude of mind, in which credulity, and with it superstition, seem likely to be engendered.

Taking the normal child who is neither precocious nor sophisticated, we notice that he realizes, at least vaguely, his lack of knowledge and his dependence upon others. He is ready to lend credence to all that is told him. Fairies and giants and gnomes, stories of seven-league boots, and wishing-carpets and the magic of "open sesame," cause him no difficulty. He is ready to adopt any nursery incantation, and with infinite seriousness to pledge good faith by any burlesque formula current among his playmates. Did not our Saviour then, it may be asked, in commending the child-like habit of mind, throw the door open wide to the prevalence of superstition?

To return an entirely unqualified negative to this question does not seem possible. All definitions of superstition connect it with the religious sense. It is an abuse of and deviation from true religion, but human nature being blind and wayward as it is, wherever there is a realization of the supernatural and a consciousness of that duty towards the Creator in which the essence of religion consists, there also will inevitably be found traces of the parasitic growth which is known to us by the name of superstition.

Looking back upon the remote past, we are confronted—so far as we know anything of primitive civilizations or the usages of savage tribes—with an endless vista of religious or quasi-religious observances which, at the best, must be judged grotesque and utterly irrational. Moreover, they were associated with so many forms of abominable cruelty, oppression, greed and lust, that the record is as repellent as the hideous forms of the idols to which these rites were offered. When we recall the human victims immolated by the Celts, the Aztecs, the Kandhs and many other peoples, the foundation sacrifices known in so many parts of the world, the practice of suttee by which all over India wives were constrained to perish on the pyre which consumed the remains of their dead husbands,[1] and many similar abominations, the superstitions pre-

[1] "In the year 1817, no less than 700 widows are said to have been burned alive in the Bengal Presidency alone. To this day the holy spots of Hindu pilgrimage are thickly dotted with little white pillars, each commemorating a *sati*." Sir W. W. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. VI, p. 405.

vailing in Christian lands may seem by comparison of trifling import. But it is not the purpose of this little book to investigate primitive cults. It is unnecessary to travel back further than that great Roman Empire into which our Lord was born, and there we find the word superstition already familiar before His coming, employed in much the same sense in which it is in use to-day.

As we may learn from the philosophical writings of Cicero, superstition was for him, as for the theologians of the late Middle Ages, a corruption, or perverse exaggeration, of true religion. No doubt the Roman orator had almost certainly before his mind the equivalent Greek word *δεισιδαιμονία* (fear of the spirit world), for he contrasted superstition, which had for its basis "a vain fear of the gods," with religion, "which consists in their dutiful worship," declaring that unbelief, or even agnosticism, must equally put an end to the one and to the other. He also throws out the curious suggestion that the first people to be called *superstitiosi* were those who continually prayed and offered sacrifices that their children might survive them (*sibi superstites esseni*), adding that the name had caught on because it aptly described a particular type of character. There does not seem to be much evidence that the Latin word was ever used in a favourable sense, but the case was otherwise with the Greek equivalent. Even in the New Testament, when St. Paul (in Acts xvii. 22) said at the Areopagus, "Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are somewhat superstitious"; a

marginal alternative "somewhat religious" (for *δεισιδαιμονεστέρους*) is proposed in the Revised Version, and it seems probable that in the circumstances the Apostle would not have begun his speech by denouncing his hearers in terms which were bound to give offence. In classical Greek instances are not wanting of the word being used in the sense of God-fearing, without any implied disparagement, but it also soon lent itself to the suggestion of exaggeration and nervous apprehensiveness in the service of the deities. Hence Theophrastus, the pupil of Aristotle, in a section of his "Characters," which I shall have occasion to quote later on, leaves us a portrait under the heading *δεισιδαίμων* which corresponds in all respects with what we now seek to convey by the term *superstitious*.

By the Latin Fathers, and notably by St. Augustine, *superstitio* is freely used in the same unfavourable sense. It was taken for granted that the meaning being plain there was nothing which called for more exact definition. The schoolmen, however, in treating of the various moral virtues felt bound to take account of those contrary acts and beliefs which offend against each in particular, and in this way, under the heading of "vices opposed to religion," St. Thomas Aquinas, with others his contemporaries, was led to make an effort after greater precision. His conclusion is that superstition is a vice contrary to religion in point of excess—not that it contributes more to the divine worship than true religion does, but because it pays divine worship either to the wrong object, or in some way in which it ought

not to be paid.[1] In the succeeding sections of the *Summa* St. Thomas goes on to point out that a man who pays divine honour to angels or to evil spirits is guilty of superstition because his worship is offered to the wrong object, and also that anyone who under the Christian dispensation should persist in practising the religious observances of the Old Law, e.g. by the sacrifice of animal victims, is similarly culpable, because his worship is presented in the wrong way.

Aquinas wrote for a world which was in agreement regarding the nature of true religion, but since his day the many millions of people who claim some sort of culture have come to differ widely in their views upon this fundamental point. If the connotation of the term superstition in the abstract remains substantially the same, the application of it in the concrete depends largely upon the standpoint of him who uses it. For the theologian who adheres to the tradition of the essential oneness of the Church founded by Christ, every rival cult is, in its measure, superstitious, whether it be that of the Unitarian, the Moslem, or the Spiritualist. All these alike, St. Thomas would hold, though they seek to honour God, are honouring Him in the wrong way. If, however, we depart from this conception of a church one and universal, we have to recognise that the word superstition, as currently employed, is no longer an absolute term. In the mouths of different people it is used to stigmatize very different things, the standard by which they measure its applicability

[1] *Summa Theologica*, Bk. II, Part II, Quæst. 92, Art. 1.

being to a large extent that of each one's own religious convictions. For nearly a thousand years the sacrifice of the Mass had been the centre of Christian worship in this country, and countless Masses had been offered for the dead at the instigation of men as enlightened as the Venerable Bede, King Alfred the Great, or Sir Thomas More. But in the preamble of the Statute of Chantries passed by Parliament in the first year of King Edward VI it was declared that "a great part of superstition and error in Christian religion" was due to the offering of "masses satisfactory for them that be departed," and in virtue of this preamble it was held by the Courts of Law for more than three centuries that bequests made for the offering of masses were gifts "for superstitious uses" and were, therefore, null and void. Similarly in the "Test" formulated in 1678 by the Parliament of Charles II it was declared that "the invocation or adoration of the Virgin Mary or any other saint, and the Sacrifice of the Mass as they are now used in the Church of Rome are superstitious and idolatrous." It was in these terms that eight successive sovereigns of England, from Queen Anne to King Edward VII, were constrained to demonstrate their loyalty to the established form of religion before they could validly give the Royal Assent to any legislative enactment.

Now the meaning of a phrase has to be determined by its current use, and with these and similar examples before us it is plain that although there are many practices which all people of sense and education would be at one in describing as super-

stitious, this word of reproach has also become to a large extent a relative term, depending upon the preconvictions of the particular speaker or writer. Hence a serious difficulty arises in framing any definition which can be generally accepted. To leave religion out of the question is barely possible, and the dictionary makers have not attempted to do so. For example, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Dr. Johnson characterizes "superstition" as "unnecessary fears or scruples in religion, observance of unnecessary and uncommanded rites and practices, religion without morality"; while a hundred years later, Emile Littré, the rationalist, identified it with "false ideas which people have of certain practices of religion to which they cling with excessive fear or excessive reliance." In recent times there seems to have been a tendency to shift the emphasis from the religious element and to lay stress upon its irrational quality. Thus, in the *Oxford New English Dictionary*, the following definition is propounded: "unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious or imaginary, especially in connection with religion; religious belief or practice founded upon fear or ignorance." On the whole I am inclined to think that Professor Albert Lehmann is right when in his *Aberglaube und Zauberei* he urges that the idea conveyed involves some reference to the standard of contemporary culture. "The word superstition," he says in effect, "may be applied to any general persuasion which, having no warrant in a recognized religious system, is in conflict with the scientific conception of nature prevalent at the

time." As Lehmann rightly urges, what may very properly be termed superstitious at one period and in one set of circumstances, may cease to be superstitious under other conditions; and vice versâ. It was not superstition but rather an exceptional knowledge of such science as had come to Europe through Hispano-Saracenic channels, which led Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon, in the thirteenth century, to believe in alchemy and the philosophers' stone. None the less anyone who should now cling to these mediæval conceptions of the transmutation of metals would almost inevitably be classed with people who live in terror of witchcraft and spend their time in taking precautions to avert the evil eye.

The point just raised seems worthy of attention, and it will not perhaps be out of place to insist upon it a little further. At the close of the twelfth century the Arab doctors, who had been in the first instance indebted for their knowledge to Alexandria and the Helleno-Egyptian philosophers, were the great teachers of science, and they introduced into western Europe, along with much practical metallurgy, such words as *alchemy*, *alcahol*, *alembic*, *algebra*, *alkali*, *borax*, *elixir*, *nadir*, *zenith*, etc. They held that *materia prima*, which was the universal substratum of matter and was identical in all bodies, was differentiated into specifically distinct substances by its conjunction with the Aristotelian elements—earth, air, fire, and water. This had given birth to the idea that the baser metals were merely what might be called an attenuation or an adulteration of those of a higher

order. The Arab empiricists were familiar with the action of mercury on gold and silver, and with that of sulphur on heated iron, and they convinced themselves of the possibility of discovering some supremely refined substance, the grand elixir or the "philosophers' stone," which, under certain conditions of temperature, etc., would be capable of transmuting gross matter into something more perfect. What is certain is that the transmutation of metals was a subject which dominated the Latin translations of the works attributed to the famous Arab philosopher, Jaber or Gebir, and that the same line of investigation, even if not always free from some admixture of fraud, had been vigorously pursued in Egypt ever since the reign of the Emperor Diocletian at the end of the third century. So far, then, from representing anything retrograde or discredited, belief in the philosophers' stone was the last word of progress for the contemporaries of Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon, and it was supported by a process of reasoning, which, on the basis of the principles then universally received, would have been admitted as sound argument by the most distinguished representatives of scholastic learning. Consequently this was not superstition, but an effort to acquire by experiment a better knowledge of physics, and an effort which, in fact, laid the foundations of what is now known to us as the science of Chemistry.

And when all is said and done, can we be so very sure that the vision of the mediæval alchemists was entirely chimerical? In our own day the trans-

mutation of the elements has once again become the preoccupation of some of our leading men of science. No doubt the quest is now pursued without any thought of acquiring material wealth. Riches beyond the dreams of avarice are no longer the goal. Neither, apparently, can it be said that any stable and undisputed success has attended the many costly experiments which have been made. But the very fact that the effort has attracted the attention of such physicists as Rutherford, Miethe, Garrett, etc., shows that there is nothing foolish in the speculation. The day may not be so far distant when a firm footing may be reached in a chemical world not very different from that of which the Arab Jaber dreamed more than a thousand years ago.

Even at the risk of a digression I cannot resist the temptation to quote a passage which shows how in the thirteenth century Friar Roger Bacon, alchemist though he was, gave proof of a wholly unconventional breadth of view. Like Pope Sylvester II at a still earlier date, his interest in physics had brought him under suspicion of magical practices. He was anxious, therefore, to prove that wonderful effects, which seemed mysterious to the uninitiated, could be produced by causes that were wholly natural, and his speculations went far afield:

> It is possible [he wrote] to devise an apparatus for sailing without the aid of rowers, in such wise that the biggest ships, with one man in control, may move, either on the river or the open sea, with greater velocity than if a full crew were on board. Similarly, cars may be constructed to travel with incalculable speed without any

animals to draw them; such, we conceive, as those scythed chariots were, which of old were used in battle. So again, flying-machines may be built, in which a man, sitting in the middle of the machine, may drive some engine, by means of which artificial pinions can be made to beat the air, as a bird does when on the wing.[1]

Good Friar Bacon had discerned the physical possibilities of the case so clearly that he seems to have persuaded himself that these feats of mechanical ingenuity had already, in part, been realized. It is plain, in any case, that if he had been able to witness the performance of modern motor-boats, or automobiles or aeroplanes, he would have been under no temptation to ascribe the result to magic.

Another somewhat similar example of a change of standpoint meets us in the case of astrology. By the vast majority of professing Christians, whatever their

[1] See J. S. Brewer's edition of the *Opus Tertium*, etc. (Rolls Series), 1859, p. 533. This sounds so incredibly pat to conditions only realized in our own day that I feel compelled to quote the Latin original. The reader will see that in translating it, I have taken no great liberties. "*Non instrumenta navigandi possunt fieri sine hominibus navigantibus, ut naves maxima, fluviales et marina, ferantur unico homine regente, majori velocitate quam si plene essent hominibus. Item currus possunt fieri ut sine animali moveatur cum impetu inestimabili ut estimamus currus falcatos fuisse, quibus antiquitus pugnabatur. Item possunt fieri instrumenta volandi, ut homo sedeat in medio instrumenti revolvens aliquod ingenium, per quod alas artificialiter compositas aeream verberent ad modum avis volantis.*" This occurs in a letter "On the hidden works of Art and Nature and the worthlessness of magic." It was addressed to "William of Paris." Can this have been William of Auvergne, Bishop of Paris, who died in 1249?

creed, any belief in the influence of the stars upon human action or human destiny would, nowadays, be rejected as pure superstition. Already in the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo, as we shall have occasion to see, was led after his conversion to express a very strong condemnation of the casting of horoscopes and the pretensions of the "genethliaci." But the views of the Arab philosophers, who had inherited the traditions of Alexandria, counted for a good deal among the schoolmen in all matters which seemed to touch on physical science. Astrology and astronomy were not yet more clearly distinguished from one another than were alchemy and chemistry. As a consequence, we find even so profound a thinker as St. Thomas Aquinas paying a certain deference to what was said about the influence of the heavenly bodies upon human affairs. The stars, he affirms, cannot directly act upon man's intellect or will, but "they can directly and of themselves act on bodies, and they can act upon those powers of the soul which are the acts of corporal organs, though only accidentally." Such teaching implied no more than a very qualified prohibition, and with the coming of the new paganism at the Renaissance, the casting of horoscopes and the observation of the heavenly bodies attained an immense vogue. More than one of the Popes at this epoch is known to have more or less habitually consulted astrologers, and, among the Reformers, if Luther showed no belief in the prognostics of the heavens, his friend Melanchthon's point of view was very different. The complete domination of such

a man as Wallenstein by this craze during the Thirty Years War has been immortalized in Schiller's well-known drama.

In the light of astronomical science, the casting of horoscopes and all the rest of the hocus-pocus adopted by the professors of this particular form of divination stand out as more patently superstitious than even so vain a pursuit as palmistry. For while it is at least conceivable that the configuration of the hand might have some relation to the past history and natural character of the owner, and in this way might create a certain presumption regarding his future, it is obvious, as St. Augustine long ago pointed out, that many individuals may be born at the same moment and under precisely the same conjunction of the planets, and yet that the particular history of each will be entirely different. If St. Liguori had not inherited a tradition which was created before the Copernican system had found acceptance, one doubts whether he would have spoken so mildly of those who use astrological calculations to foretell the future. Such predictions he pronounces to be lawful, provided they are confined to general events, such as wars, or revolutions, because the heavenly bodies, he says, according to St. Thomas may act upon the passions of men taken in the mass. "Consequently astrologers are able to foretell the truth in the majority of cases, especially in a general way."[1] It should, however, be mentioned that Pope Sixtus V in his Bull *Coeli et*

[1] St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Quest. 115, Art. 3, Ad. 2.

terræ Creator, published in 1526, denounces astrologers and all their works in much more severe terms. He dwells at some length upon the absurdity of supposing that by "a most vain observation of the exact moment of an infant's birth, every detail of his career, his journeys, his quarrels, his financial successes or failures, his moments of danger, his children and all the rest, can be foretold." So far as any truth is to be found in such predictions, the Pope declares that it is due to the devil's subtle knowledge of many conditions and secret influences already at work which are not yet manifest to the world at large. In the same pronouncement books which contain such prognostications are condemned and prohibited, though an exception is made for forecasts in treatises dealing with agriculture, navigation and medicine.

That there was much talk of astrology in England, even at the beginning of the fifteenth century, appears clearly from that very able and wholesome tractate which is called *Dives and Pauper*. Internal evidence shows that it must have been written shortly after 1406. Thus it cannot well be the work, as has been asserted, of the Carmelite Henry Parker, who died in 1470. No less than fifteen chapters of this book are devoted to satirizing the astrologers, the argument being pressed with much vigour and point. The writer insists upon the superstitious and consequently sinful character of such beliefs, saying for example: "In these days men do worship to the sun, moon and stars, so that for to worship the stars and the planets and the craft of astronomy,

they will put God out of His maystrie, and out of His freedom, and make Him more bound to the stars than was ever any King, or any lord, or any man upon earth. They will be of God's privy council, will God or not, and rule His dooms, His deeds, His works, and all by their will and by the course of the planets."

Still more curious is the revolution of ideas which has taken place in a contrary sense, in the matter of the divining rod. Three hundred years ago ecclesiastical authorities and men of education described it unhesitatingly as a notable superstition. One of the earliest to mention such a practice is Martin Luther in his *Decem Praecepta* which was first printed in 1518. Treating of those who by their idolatries and profanities, etc., sin against the first commandment of the decalogue, Luther remarks: "To this class also belong those who seek hidden treasures by means of the divining rod" ("*qui virga divinationis occultos quaerunt thesauros*"). It must be remembered that it was in prospecting for veins of metal ore in the mines of Germany that the divining rod (*Schlagrute* or *Wünschelrute*) first came to attract attention. Even in 1646, when Sir Thomas Browne sent to the press his *Enquiries into Vulgar and Common Errors*, he says nothing of water-finding, but observes: "A strange kind of exploration and peculiar way of rhabdomancy is that which is used in mineral discoveries: that is with a forked hazel, commonly called 'Moses' rod,' which freely held forth, will stir and play if any mine be under it. And though many there are who have attempted

to make it good, yet, until better information, we are of opinion with Agricola [this was George Agricola who died in 1553, in his book *De Re Metallica*] that in itself it is a fruitless exploration strongly scenting of a pagan origin." It must be admitted that in the seventeenth century the rod was used not only for the purpose of discovering springs of water and lodes of metal but also for tracing criminals and determining the original position of boundary marks. This may have helped to discredit the whole procedure in the eyes of sensible men. For very few indeed had, themselves, any personal experience of a practice the results of which were at no time very easy to verify. The Oratorian, Father Pierre Lebrun, published in 1693 a dissertation on *la baguette*, afterwards greatly enlarged, in which he condemned its use as a mere superstition, while writers on moral theology, both before his time and after, with very few exceptions, expressed a similar view. Even as late as 1925 we find in the fifth edition of Father T. Slater's *Manual of Moral Theology*, the following pronouncement:

> The use of the divining rod under the belief that a stick of a special shape cut from a particular kind of tree or bush will point out hidden treasure or mines, or springs of water, is superstitious and sinful. For it is certain that there is no natural force which acts in the arbitrary manner in which the divining rod is said to act under the circumstances.

This view, however, is by no means endorsed by the most recent exponents of Catholic moral

teaching [1] and, strange to say, there are a considerable number of physicists and practical business men who, after long and patient investigation, have convinced themselves that the dowser's inexplicable faculty is not illusory. The late Sir William Barrett, F.R.S., was a firm believer and had collected an immense mass of notes on the subject, which have in part been published since his death. It cannot be doubted that in the hands of some peculiarly constituted individuals (perhaps not more than one person in fifty) the divining rod bends suddenly and with irresistible violence at certain determined spots when the operators are, for example, crossing an open field, and that in numberless cases these indications of the presence of an underground spring have been verified by subsequent boring. Even so matter-of-fact an authority as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (both in the 1910 and 1929 editions) leaves the genuineness of this faculty an open question, and in the later issue remarks: "Like the 'homing' instinct of certain birds and animals the dowser's power lies beneath the level of conscious perception; and the forked twig acts as an index of some material or other mental disturbance within him, which otherwise he could not interpret." Similarly, the electrical expert, Sir W. H. Preece, some years ago, in a letter to *The Times*, while repudiating the idea that any electrical force was involved, suggested that the water-finding was due to "a mechanical vibration, set up by the friction of moving water, acting upon

[1] See, for example, the textbooks of Noldin, Prümmer, Tanquerey, Sabetti-Barrett, etc.

the sensitive ventral diaphragm of certain delicately framed persons." This last explanation, however, would not cover the case of the locating of metallic bodies, for which also quite remarkable evidence is available.

I am not here concerned to vindicate belief in the powers of the dowser, and I am well aware that Messrs. Eve and Keys in their *Applied Geophysics* (Cambridge, 1929) have argued strongly against it, but it is at any rate clear that what was at one time ridiculed by educated opinion as purely superstitious is now taken seriously by a number of people whom no one will be tempted to describe as either credulous or unintelligent.

All this must tend to narrow considerably the field of our inquiry. If a belief has formal warrant in a recognized religious system, however little it may commend itself to what we hold to be common sense, we are not, under modern conditions, justified in stigmatizing it as a superstition. Spiritualism is no older than the middle of the last century, Christian Science is younger still, but by this time these have both established themselves as cults that are well known and organized, possessing numerous places of worship in many great cities. It would hardly be just to apply the epithet superstitious either to the belief that the dead can communicate with the living, or to the teaching that a healer by concentrating upon the ailments of an invalid who is not present can restore that person to health. Similarly, we have to recognize that Science, learning caution from such revelations as are called to mind by the

words radium, electrons, relativity, etc., is growing more chary in its pronouncements regarding the limits of the possible. An eminent Professor of Physiology and member of the French Institute, M. Charles Richet, has promulgated his views concerning a still unrecognized "sixth sense" in the following terms :

The real world sends out vibrations around us. Some of them are perceived by our senses ; others, not perceptible to our senses, are disclosed by our scientific instruments : but there are still others perceived neither by our senses nor by our scientific instruments, which act upon certain human minds and reveal to them fragments of reality.

To take a homely example. I stumbled the other day upon a passage in Christopher Davenport's *Religio Philosophi Peripati* (1662) in which he writes—I translate rather freely :—

At times we shudder on the instant when we are brought into contiguity with certain objects on account of something jarring in the way they affect our sensorium. They act by radiations (*radios*) which are invisible but not otherwise than material. In this manner some people's tactile sense is set quivering by the unseen presence of a cat. I have known a friend of mine to be repeatedly reduced to a state of panic, when a cat was lurking under the table, even before he caught sight of it.

One has heard the same thing of the late Lord Roberts and many others, so much so that in *Notes and Queries* (6 June, 1891) the then Editor remarked, when commenting upon a case of this sort, "we have personally known many instances of antipathy

to cats, and some of overmastering fear in their presence." This, clearly, is not superstition, but an effect due to natural causation, however little we are able to explain it.

Then again there is that most puzzling immunity from the effects of burning heat which has been repeatedly attested in connection with the "fire walks" practised by fakirs in India, Japan, and other parts of the world. In very many accounts which come to us upon unexceptionable authority, we read how crowds of people with bare feet, including women and children, walk through a bed of red-hot ashes without sustaining the least hurt. Europeans have, on several occasions, joined in the parade, but so long as the presiding influence has sanctioned the experiment, they have not suffered. The matter cannot be discussed here, but it may be pointed out that the immunity from injury is certainly not due to any preparation used to protect the feet, nor, as Sir James Frazer has suggested, to the thickness of the integument in the case of people accustomed to walk barefoot. The numerous accounts of such fire-walks which may be found in the *Proceedings* and *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research, as also in Mr. Andrew Lang's *Magic and Religion* and M. Olivier Leroy's little book *Les Hommes Salamandres*, make this point abundantly clear. With such examples before our eyes we shall have to admit that many of those who believe in the magic powers of African witch-doctors and rain-makers are not necessarily guilty of superstition. They may have evidence not generally known which convinces them

that hidden forces come into play to which science is so far a stranger. And without going so far off as Africa, what are we to make of such a story as the following, which is told by the author of *The Experiences of an Irish R.M.*? It occurs under the heading of "A Nineteenth-Century Miracle" in the volume entitled *All on the Irish Shore*.

Mrs. Pat Naylor's horse in a hunt over very rough country with stone-wall hedges had had the misfortune to cut its leg badly against a jagged slate. The blood was streaming down and it seemed as if the poor beast would bleed to death before she could get him home, when happily she chanced to meet a blind fiddler and his daughter, to whom she disclosed her plight. The old man was a "blood healer," and thereupon, we are told:

> His hands went unguided to the wound, from which the steady flow of blood had never ceased. With one hand he closed the lips of the cut, with the other he crossed himself three times. . . . Afterwards he muttered to himself, still holding the wound in one hand. Mrs. Pat could distinguish no words, but it seemed to her that he repeated three times what he was saying. Then he straightened himself and stroked Pilot's quarter with a light pitying hand. Mrs. Pat stared. The bleeding had ceased. There was nothing to explain the mystery, but the fact remained.
>
> "He'll do now," said the blind man. "Take him on to Carnforther, but you'll want to get five stitches in that to make a good job of it."

At a later stage in the story we find one of the Whips conversing with his master.

"The horse would have bled to death before the lady got to Carnfother, sir. It isn't the first time I've seen life saved by that one. Sure, didn't I see him heal a man that got his leg in a mowing machine, and he half dead, with the blood spurting out of him like two rainbows."

Then Miss Somerville, the writer, adds:

This is not a fairy story. Neither let it be set lightly down as a curious coincidence. I know the charm the old man said. I cannot give it here. It will only work successfully if taught by man to woman or by woman to man; nor do I pretend to say that it will work for everyone. I believe it to be a personal and wholly incomprehensible gift, but that such a gift has been bestowed, and in more parts of Ireland than one, is a bewildering and indisputable fact.

Even on such authority I should hesitate to quote this tale, were it not that others, upon whose critical and sober judgment I should rely in all the ordinary affairs of life, have assured me with much earnestness that they also have known cases of the same gift.

Perhaps this should be accounted a superstition, for belief in such a faculty has no warrant in any recognized form of religious teaching, while it certainly seems to run counter to the laws of nature as commonly understood. If it claimed to be a miracle it could more easily be defended, for the Bible, to which all Christian Churches appeal, is one long record of miracles, and though the non-Catholic denominations have for the most part maintained that miracles came to an end with the Apostolic age, the Roman tradition is definitely

committed to a belief in their continuance. When the Council of the Vatican pronounced: "If anyone should say that no miracles can be wrought . . . or that they can never be known with certainty, or that by them the divine origin of the Christian religion cannot be rightly proved, let him be anathema," this utterance certainly cannot be limited to the miracles recounted in Holy Scripture. At the same time the credibility of each individual modern miracle has to be determined upon its own evidence, neither is any one of them in particular a matter of faith. No Catholic, for example, is bound in conscience to believe that a cure at Lourdes, even when fully approved by ecclesiastical authority, is necessarily of supernatural origin. Moreover, in spite of the fact that down to recent times there was often a regrettable tendency, even among ecclesiastics of high position, to see miracles everywhere, still warnings against over-credulity were not entirely lacking. For example in the Constitution *Officiorum ac Munerum* of Pope Leo XIII, we read:

> Books and writings which recount new apparitions, revelations, visions, prophecies and miracles, or which introduce new devotions, even under the plea of their being for private use, supposing such to be published without the lawful permission of ecclesiastical authority, are forbidden.

It would, however, be idle to deny that much superstition, which no one would now defend, has existed in connection with certain forms of supposed miracle in which all common sense is set at defiance.

On the other hand there is what might not unreasonably be described as a superstition on the rationalistic side which consists in accepting the most worthless evidence and in applying the most unfavourable interpretation to every practice, ceremony or historical incident connected with religious worship. Not only is it assumed that the Church is indebted to paganism for all that is most striking in her ritual and symbolism, but sinister meanings are attached to things which the slightest attempt at investigation would prove to be quite innocent.[1]

To take one illustration, the late Mr. Richard Bagot in his book *My Italian Year* stated that at Bassano in northern Italy, as late as 1705, "the procession of the Host was followed by a so-called car of Purgatory in which, for the edification of the faithful, twenty living infants were thrown into the flames and burned to death." When challenged in the Press, Mr. Bagot averred that his allegation was based on authorities who had "carefully consulted the local records" and that he had introduced the incident as "an example of the lengths to which religious superstition was capable of going." It was only after an interval of nearly three years that the same writer, constrained by reminders at intervals from those who had noted that the statement was

[1] For an extreme and unpleasant example in point, reference may be made to a footnote on p. 179 of Miss Margaret Murray's *Witchcraft in Western Europe*. This is not only based upon a misquotation of one of the commonest formularies of Catholic devotion, but it involves a curious ignorance of the text of the New Testament.

being further circulated on his authority, admitted that the burning of the children was the result of an accident, in which the car caught fire, sixteen children lost their lives and several others were injured. A ducal edict was at once issued which prohibited the use of such cars in future.[1]

One other example may be added of the same ridiculous acceptance of an improbable story, without any attempt at investigation, simply because it fell in with what the person who repeated it would like to believe to be true. It acquires importance from the fact that it was Mr. Edward Clodd who, in his presidential address to the Folk Lore Society in 1894, informed the members that "in a village in the Abruzzi the young men draw lots every year to decide who should die for Christ. Whoever drew the fatal lot was secretly killed by another, equally drawn for the purpose, before the next Good Friday. It was accounted a great honour to die for Christ." This statement, being echoed in other Folk Lore publications, came to the notice of Signor de Nino, a recognized authority on the customs and traditions of the Abruzzi. He denied that there was any shadow of foundation for the alleged custom, and quoted other experts in the same sense, pointing out the intrinsic improbability of the story in some detail. Needless to say, nothing has been heard of it since.

Certainly there is a deplorable amount of superstition in the world, but there is something of very

[1] For the evidence of this and for the terms of Mr. Bagot's retractation see *The Month*, May and August 1913.

much the same character in the blind prejudice which, to bolster up its contemptuous attitude towards all the practices of religion, is ready to circulate, without inquiry, any random tale which for the moment serves its purpose. What is more, the offenders in this case, cannot, as the Spanish peasantry or the Neapolitan lazzaroni might do, plead lack of education or universal bad example. Even among belligerent rationalists there are those who show self-restraint in these matters. Here is a quotation from the late F. C. Conybeare's *Myth, Magic and Morals*, a work published by the Rationalist Press Association and very outspoken in its attack on revealed religion.

> It only remains [writes Mr. Conybeare] to address a warning to those who desire to make a speedy end of orthodox Christianity in the belief that if they could make a *tabula rasa* of the European mind, something much better would instantly take its place. I would advise such dreamers to enter a museum of anthropology, like the Pitt Rivers collection in Oxford, and survey the hideous goblins and ghouls still worshipped by savage races all over the globe. Let them only visit Perugia and inspect the collection of ancient, mediæval and modern Italian fetiches collected there by a Professor Giuseppe Bellucci. There is no difference between those of the present and those of past ages. Perhaps we ought to be grateful to the Catholic Church in Latin countries for having established cults so respectable as those of the Virgin and the saints; for it is certain that in default of them, the Latin peasant would relapse into a fetichism as old as the hills around him. You can turn Spanish and Italian peasants into anti-clericals, but you seldom

turn them into Rationalists. They may give up Christianity; but they only believe all the more firmly in the evil eye, and in all the debasing practices which attend that belief. In the same way the Irish peasant, if you robbed him of his Catholicism, would at once lapse into the cult of hobgoblins: for this, in spite of the effort made during centuries by the Church to eradicate it, lies everywhere a very little way below the surface, and belongs to the inmost convolutions of his brain.

Most of this, no doubt, is substantially true, but I should be tempted to push the argument a little further. It is not only the Italian, Spanish, or Irish peasant, but the *genus homo* in all stages of evolution that feels the want of what we may call an anthropomorphic religion. For example the inspiring influence of Freemasonry at its foundation was Deism—the fact is now no longer disputed. It aimed at showing that natural religion sufficed, and that any positive revelation was superfluous. And yet, from its beginnings in 1717 down to the present time, this rationalizing cult has clung to a masquerade and to a bogus history of Boaz and Jachim and Hiram, etc., which are as much an outrage to the critical sense as the most extravagant of the myths of the dark ages. The bulk of mankind turn to mascots and fetishes, as children and kittens delight in toys, and to look forward to a future when superstition will be banished from the world is, I submit, to dream of the impossible.

CHAPTER II

UNDER THE ROMAN EMPIRE

THE world into which our Lord was born was a world given over to superstition. Even in the old republican days of Rome, the belief in sorcery and incantations had become such a menace to the well-being of the State that it had to be checked by legislation. At the beginning of the fifth century, St. Augustine of Hippo found occasion in his great work *De Civitate Dei* (VIII, 19) to call attention to this. He tells us on Cicero's authority that a law of the Twelve Tables forbade a man, under heavy penalties, to cast a spell over his neighbour's fields in order to attract their fertility to his own estate. Extravagant as the idea seems, there are so many allusions to it in the Latin classics that we can hardly doubt the existence of some such popular belief. Pliny, in his Natural History, relates how Lucius Furius Cresinus having obtained larger crops on his small piece of land than his neighbours were able to get from their much bigger farms, was suspected of using sorcery. In order to forestall the anticipated condemnation, he appeared before the Curule Ædile, bringing into the forum all his sturdy, well fed and warmly clad household with his workmanlike agricultural implements, his cattle and

his carts. "These," he said, "Quirites, are the magic spells which I can show you. What I cannot show you is the hard work, the early hours and the forethought which have put them to good use." "And so," writes Pliny, "it came to pass that he was unanimously acquitted." [1] In the Augustan age, the references to sorcery, as every reader of the classics knows, are innumerable. Hence, during the first centuries of the Empire, while all belief in the older Roman polytheism was gradually decaying, largely as a consequence of the influx of oriental superstitions, the temptation to dabble in necromancy and other mysteries of the occult invaded all classes of the population. As Sir Samuel Dill has noticed, "The belief in the arts of magic, divination and astrology was probably the most living and energetic force in the pagan sentiment of the times." [2] Similarly another authority who, though little disposed to over-stress the influence for good of the Christian teachers of antiquity, writes with exceptionally full knowledge of the period, delivers himself as follows:

> We probably realize inadequately the pernicious effects of astrology and magic in the last age of pagan antiquity. These superstitions were all-pervading, and except for accidentally stimulating interest in the heavenly bodies and to a less extent in physics, they did unmitigated

[1] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Lib. XVIII, Cap. 8, 41–5; cf. Vergil, *Eclogues*, VIII, 1, 100; Tibullus, I, 8, 19.—"Cantus vicinis fruges traducit ab agris."

[2] Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire*, 2nd ed., p. 48.

harm. Christian apologists might well claim more credit than they have done for the Church as the liberator of Europe from these two causes of human wretchedness. Astrology no doubt lingered on, though no longer sheltered by religion; and magic survives as "the black art," in spite of fierce attempts at repression, but Christianity may take at least some of the credit for reducing a permanent nightmare of the spirit to a discredited and slowly dying superstition.[1]

Things were not any better in Athens and Alexandria than they were in Rome. Indeed, despite the higher intellectual culture of these two centres of learning, they seem to have been worse. The famous *ληκύθου ἀπώλεσεν* (he lost his little oil-flask) which Aristophanes in *The Frogs* uses as a tag to burlesque the monotonous cadences of the Euripidean iambics, seems to have derived much of its point from the fact that the citizens usually carried a portable oil-flask about with them to serve for ceremonial unctions in case they inadvertently provoked the resentment of the deities. At any rate Theophrastus, some three hundred years before Christ, has left the following sketch amongst his "Characters":

The superstitious man is one who will wash his hands at a fountain, sprinkle himself from a temple font, put a bit of laurel leaf into his mouth, and so go about for the day. If a weasel run across his path, he will not pursue his walk until someone else has traversed the road, or until he has thrown three stones across it. He will pour oil from his flask on the smooth stones at the

[1] Dean Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol. I, pp. 50–1.

cross roads, as he goes by, and will fall on his knees and worship them before he departs. If a mouse gnaws through a meal bag he will go to the expounder of sacred law and ask what is to be done; and if the answer is "give it to a cobbler to stitch up" he will disregard this counsel, and go his way, and expiate the omen by sacrifice.[1]

The "smooth stones" here spoken of, as Mr. W. R. Halliday explains in *Folk Lore*, marked the cross roads, "the particular haunt of Hecate and her attendant bands of ghosts, the most dreaded variety of which were those who had untimely lost their lives by violence. . . . Here there stood cairns of stones, and these the superstitious man is scrupulous to anoint with oil from his flask as he goes by and to fall on his knees and worship them before he departs." Whether any connection exists between this Greek tradition and the ancient practice in England of burying suicides at the cross roads with a stake through their body is not clear.

In no part of the Roman Empire were these credulities confined to the ignorant and the vulgar herd. It was rather among the ruling classes that they found most favour. Sir Samuel Dill in his volume on *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* devotes a long chapter to this subject. In particular he points out how all the Emperors, not even excepting Marcus Aurelius himself, were the slaves of superstitious practices, often of the most extravagant kind. Neither can it be said that these who

[1] Theophrastus, Jebb's translation, pp. 141–5. The authenticity of this section is now no longer disputed.

were prominent in the literature of the silver age showed a more intelligent outlook. Men like Suetonius and the younger Pliny made no secret of the perturbation which they experienced from what seemed an ominous dream, and in any case, the glimpses they afford of contemporary feeling make it clear that fashionable society was quite shameless in its avowal of apprehensions as absurdly puerile as the remedies to which it had recourse were utterly irrational. There was probably little exaggeration in the satire of Petronius who describes how Trimalchio, when a cock creates consternation by crowing during the banquet, spills his wine under the table with the view of averting the evil omen, passes, with the same purpose, his rings from his left to his right hand and peremptorily orders that the bird which caused this sinister interruption must be destroyed forthwith. Plutarch cannot have been writing without observation and experience when, in his essay on the subject, he described superstition as a craven fear of the deity which filled the whole universe with spectres. "Better," he adds, "not believe in a deity at all than cringe before gods who are worse than the worst of men. Unbelief does not so much dishonour the deity whose existence it denies."

We get much the same impression from the copious allusions to this topic made a century or two later by the great preachers and doctors of the Church. St. Chrysostom, in his twelfth homily on the Epistle to the Ephesians, declares that the soul of the Greeks is filled with many fears, and he

pictures how such misguided people are prone to claim sympathy for their vexations of spirit.

> The other day the first to meet me on my way out was so and so; ten thousand evils are bound to befall me. Then my confounded servant in bringing me my shoes gave me the left one first; that means dreadful trouble and everywhere black looks. Again as I quitted the house, I crossed the threshold left foot foremost, a sure sign of worse misfortune, and afterwards there was a throbbing below my right eye, for a certainty portending the near coming of tears.

"In fact," St. Chrysostom goes on, after referring to the omens which women deduce from the little accidents and noises which occur when they are working at the loom, "if an ass bray, or if a cock crow, or if anyone sneezes, or if the slightest thing happens out of the common, these crazy folk, like people loaded with chains and shut up in a dark prison, tremble at every sound and are more abject in their misery than a whole marketful of slaves."

St. Augustine who, in the days before his conversion, had had much to do with the *mathematici* or astrologers, was well qualified to show up the weak points in a system then very prevalent. He lays stress upon the consideration that if the actions of men are governed by the stars, all moral responsibility is thereby eliminated. As he points out in a letter, the *mathematicus* who has been fatuously predicting the course of destiny to the wealthy clients who pay him fees, puts aside his ivory tablets and returns home to attend to his household affairs.

There he finds his wife and scolds her roundly or even gives her a good trouncing because she has flirted with a passer-by or wasted her time looking out of the window. She might very well say to him, "What are you beating me for? You ought to beat Venus if you can. It was she made me do it." But he does not give a thought to the nonsense he has faked to impose upon strangers. He is only intent on the sound reason he has for chastising his wife.[1]

More than once the same shrewd critic pours ridicule upon the mercenary side of the business. "These astrologers," he says for example, "want to sell us into slavery to the stars; but it is they who get the money and we who have to find the wherewithal."[2]

Upon the countless superstitious practices which were rife in every station of society, St. Augustine was not less competent to speak. Apart from his own personal experiences in Italy and Africa, he was well acquainted with the *Historia Naturalis* of the elder Pliny, an author who, perhaps more than any other writer, and especially in Book XXVIII of the work just named, enables us to see how credulous, even in his time, the élite of Roman civil life had become. It is from Pliny that we learn how the great Julius Caesar, having once met with an accident when driving in a chariot, would never afterwards let himself travel in any vehicle drawn by horses without repeating a certain spell three times, and Pliny adds that others followed his example.

[1] *Epistola* 246; (Migne, P.L., Vol. XXXIII, c. 1061).
[2] *De diversis Quaestionibus*, 45, n. 2; (P.L., Vol XL., c. 29).

So again Marcus Servilius Nonianus, *princeps civitatis* at Rome, fearing that he was likely to lose his sight, had a piece of paper with the Greek letters *rho* and *alpha* written on it. This he wrapped in linen and wore round his neck, and unless he was wearing the charm he would not venture to utter the name of the disease. Mucianus again, who was consul three times, had a live fly, wrapped in a piece of white linen, which he also carried about as a charm against ophthalmia!

Naturally things did not get any better while the Oriental occultists were everywhere gaining new adherents, and St. Augustine has much to say on the subject. In his *De Doctrina Christiana* he speaks of the "thousands of silly observances" to which people paid heed in the Carthage of his day. By way of illustration he talks of the case of two friends who are walking together, when a stone, or a dog, or a child comes between them, an omen of some quarrel in the near future.

> I don't mind [says Augustine] their stamping on the stone which has thus threatened to sever their friendship. There is not so much harm in that as when they begin clouting the boy who has dared to part them. The amusing thing is that the dog sometimes pays them out for what they have done to the boy. For there are people so superstitious that they go to the length of beating the dog who has run between, and it serves them right when the cur turns upon his assailant and in place of an imaginary remedy sends him off to consult a doctor in grim earnest.

You have the same sort of folly [he goes on] when

people will not pass the house they live in without touching the threshold with their foot, when a man putting on his shoes on rising in the morning goes back to bed again if he happens to sneeze, when a man returns home if he stumbles on going out of the door, and when people whose clothes have been nibbled by mice are less upset by the mischief done than by the omen of disaster to follow. It was in such case that Cato so happily said, when consulted by some one whose slippers the mice had been gnawing, "Well, I don't see anything so portentous in that; it would be much more alarming if your slippers had eaten the mice." [1]

It is curious to find what must surely be either the original or an echo of the same story in Cicero's *De Divinatione* (II, 28, 62). The humorist in this case is not named, but having been told as a remarkable prodigy that a snake had coiled itself round the bolt of a front door, he replied, so Cicero reports, that he would have been more disposed to consider it a real prodigy if the bolt had coiled itself round the snake.

One aspect of the matter which had a very practical bearing upon the steadfastness in the faith of Christians living in such an atmosphere of superstition was the question of charms. Many times over Augustine returns to the subject and notably in his sermons to the people. He makes it clear to us that no sooner did a man fall ill than he was beset by all kinds of well-meaning pagan advisers who pressed their magical remedies upon him and would

[1] *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. II, Ch. 20 (P.L., Vol. XXXIV, cc. 50–1).

hardly take a refusal. These nostrums for the most part consisted of charms or spells, something worn, or tied on, which, in consequence, are most commonly referred to as *ligaturæ*. But we also hear of *inaures*, some kind of earring which was worn by men and covered the top of the ear, and of *characteres*, which obviously were written spells. All these things the Saint denounces as forms of deviltry. He admits that drugs and other preparations taken internally might have a therapeutic value, even if the prescription came from a suspected source. But these *ligaturæ*, worn round the neck or attached to some limb, could have no efficacy except that which they derived from the tacit appeal to the demons by whom such devices had been invented to ensnare mankind. The language, accordingly, in which Augustine denounces this form of superstition in his sermons is extraordinarily vigorous. More than once when preaching on the martyrs of the Church, he suggests to his hearers that, as the martyrs of old fought against tyrants and persecutors, the Christian has now to fight against the assaults of the devil. And one of the principal forms in which this contest presented itself was that of a struggle against diabolical superstitions. These are the terms in which the orator urges his point.

It happens that a Christian falls ill, and there the tempter is beside him. Health is promised him at the price of a prohibited sacrifice, a pestilent and sacrilegious *ligatura*, of an impious incantation, of an acceptance of sorcery. He is told: "This one or that one was in much more grievous danger than you are, and this was

how he recovered. If you want to live you must do the same; if you refuse you will surely die." Think what this means—"You will die if you don't deny Christ." That very same threat which the persecutors openly used to the martyr, this is what the hidden tempter insidiously suggests to you now. "Accept my remedy and you shall live." Is not that the same as saying: "Offer sacrifice and your life shall be spared. If you refuse you will die"? Is not that the same as saying: "If you will not offer sacrifice, death is the penalty"? It is the same combat you have to face. Set your heart on gaining the same palm of victory. Your sick bed is your arena. As you lie helpless, you are wrestling with the foe. Only hold fast to the faith and as the end of life is reached, the victory is won.[1]

Perhaps the point which the modern reader will regard with most interest in the manifold superstitions of the decaying Roman empire is the number of instances in which we can trace the survival during long centuries of the same irrational practices handed down from pagan times. It will not be out of place to give a few illustrations.

Take, for example, the *ligaturæ* and *characteres*, against which St. Augustine protested so vehemently, and which seem to have retained their hold on popular credulity for more than a thousand years. Reginald Scott in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) groups together "charms, amulets, periapts and characters," and Cotgrave in his *Dictionary* tells us that "periapt" were "a medicine hanged about

[1] *Sermo* 318 (P.L., Vol. XXXVIII, cc. 1435–40); *cf. Sermi* 4, 56 (P.L., Vol. XXXVIII, cc. 31–5); *Sermo* 286 (P.L., Vol. XXXVIII, c. 1301).

any part of the body." So Shakespeare (*Henry VI*, v. 3) represents the Pucelle as invoking this unholy assistance:

> The Regent conquers and the Frenchmen fly.
> Now help, ye charming spells and periapts;

where the word "charming" bears its original sense of an influence exerted through magic. But an earlier and more striking example is furnished us by Sir Thomas More in his *Dialogue of Comfort*. He writes:

> And many a fond fool there is that when he lieth sick, will meddle with no physic in no manner wise, but send his cap or his hose to a wise woman, otherwise called a witch. Then sendeth she word again that she hath spied in his hose where, when he took no heed, he was taken with a sprite between two doors as he went in the twilight, but the sprite would not let him feel it in five days after; and it hath all the while festered in his body, and that is the grief that paineth him so sore. But let him go to no leechcraft, nor any manner of physic, other than good meat and strong drink, for syraps should souse him up. But he shall have five leaves of valerian that she enchanted with a charm and gathered with her left hand: let him lay those five leaves to his right thumb, not bind it fast to, but let it hang loose thereat by a green thread; he shall never need to change it, look it fall not away, but let it hang till he be whole and he shall need no more. In such wise witches, and in such mad medicines have many fools more faith a great deal than in God.

No one who reads this can fail to understand what a periapt was like.

But let us take for another example the cura-

tive virtue attributed to fasting spittle, to which Pliny makes frequent reference in Book XXVIII of his *Natural History*. The very best remedy against snake bites, he declares (Ch. 7) is *saliva jejuna*, and it was also said to be a cure for boils and other ailments. The old woman, Bridget Bostock at Coppenhall in Cheshire, to whom in 1748 many hundreds of people resorted in hope of being healed of their ailments, had certainly not read Pliny. But a correspondent in the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported that "the chief thing she cures with is fasting-spittle and, 'God bless you,' with faith." Moreover, she evidently had a genuine belief in the virtue of fasting spittle, for at six o'clock in the evening she grew so faint, having eaten nothing all day, that she had to give over her doctoring, though there still remained more than sixty patients to whom she had not yet attended.[1] No doubt this fantastic remedy had lingered on in popular belief, for we find Massinger writing in his play *Very Women* (1631):

> Let him but fasting spit upon a toad
> And presently it bursts and dies.

Indeed, the efficacy of fasting spittle was taken so seriously that "an eminent physician," said to be Nicholas Robinson, M.D., wrote a treatise upon it of which a fifth edition was printed in 1767. An idea of its contents may be derived from one of the sections which is headed: "Of the properties, virtues and salutary effects of the fasting-saliva, when externally applied to old aches, pains, recent cuts.

[1] *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1748, p. 414.

wounds, old ulcers, corns, sore eyes, and gouty nodes."

Another curious practice which can be traced back almost to the time of Christ is that concerning egg-shells. It is Pliny again who tells us (*Historia Naturalis*, Bk. XXVIII, c. 4) that the shells of eggs or snails ought to be perforated after the contents are consumed. The idea with him appears to be that, otherwise, these become the lurking places in which incantations and spells can be written, dangerous to the well-being of those who have dispossessed the legitimate occupants. It is not, however, very clear what is precisely the mischief which threatens if the shell is left intact. But there is much evidence that many people, to this day, consider it a duty to thrust the spoon through the bottom of the egg. We are told that Napoleon III after being proclaimed Emperor, suspecting that his earlier education might perhaps have been defective in matters of social etiquette, requested a friend to point out any particulars in which he offended against the code which French standards prescribed. One of the things to which his attention was then directed was his neglect to break up the shell of his egg. In any case it is still undoubtedly the custom, especially in France and Ireland, to pierce the bottom of the shell after eating an egg *à la coque*. That the same usage must have prevailed in England seems clear from the words of Sir Thomas Browne in his *Vulgar Errors* (V, 23) "to break the egg shell after the meat is out, we are taught in our childhood, and practise it all our lives." The idea which prevailed in many parts

of the country was that this was done "to keep the fairies out" or, as Dean Wren, the father of Sir Christopher Wren, otherwise expressed it, "lest the witches, perchance, might use them for boats to sail in by night."

Another ancient superstition still current, though probably not taken very seriously by anyone nowadays, is the notion that a tingling of the ears is a sign that we are being talked about. Here again Pliny assures us that it is an accepted truth that the absent have a presentiment by a buzzing in their ears (*tinnitu aurium*) that they are being made the subject of conversation. Some sixteenth-century authors further declared that a tingling in the right ear meant that a friend was speaking, and if in the left, an enemy; but others, with about as much foundation in fact, reversed the rule. When Beatrice says:—(*Much Ado About Nothing*, III, 1) "What fire is in mine ears!" this is probably an allusion to the more widespread persuasion that the gossip concerning the absent is generally uncharitable.

On the whole, however, it must be admitted that there is little consistency in the interpretation of these popular omens, even though the same trivial accidents of daily life have, from time immemorial, been invested by the superstitious with a quite portentous significance. An interesting example of this sort is the sensation caused by a sudden sneeze. Often in pre-Christian days this was taken as an auspicious sign of the favour of heaven, as, for example, in the *Odyssey* (XVII, 541) when Telemachus's "mighty sneeze" gave joy to Penelope

and foreshadowed the discomfiture of her suitors. So, too, in the *Anabasis*, a similar incident occurring in the course of Xenophon's speech (III, 2, 9) led the whole army to perform an act of worship and was accounted an omen sent by Zeus, the preserver, to restore their confidence. Passages in Aristotle, Catullus and many other early writers may be appealed to as testifying in a similar sense. But St. Augustine, as we have seen, speaks of a man going back to bed again because he chanced to sneeze as he was putting on his shoes; and this adverse interpretation seems to have prevailed with subsequent generations. It was probably much aided by a story which later obtained currency regarding Pope St. Gregory the Great. In his time a plague is said to have devastated Italy, the recognized symptoms of which were yawning and sneezing. As soon as a man began to sneeze he was given up for lost, and in this way we are told that at the Pope's behest a custom was introduced of greeting anyone who sneezed with "God save thee," or some such phrase, a practice which survives in many parts of Europe to this day. John Aubrey in England about 1686 records: "We have a custom that when one sneezes every one else puts off his hat and bows and cries 'God bless thee, sir'"; and he goes on: "I have heard or read a story that many years since sneezing was an epidemical disease and very mortal, which caused this yet received custom. In Germany 'tis counted to be very uncivilly done not to say at once 'God bless thee' or '*Salutem*'!" In Bohemia the third Sunday in Lent is called *Kychound neděle*

(Sneezing Sunday) apparently from some supposed connection with the plague above mentioned, and we learn that the peasantry are not only punctilious in greeting the person who sneezes with "The Lord save thee," but that he is expected to make reply, "May the Lord God do this." On the other hand abundant evidence shows that the practice of such salutations is far older than the time of St. Gregory. In the Greek anthology a man with a very long nose is ridiculed in an epigram the point of which is that when he sneezes he fails to cry "Zeus, save me," because the noise of the sneeze is too far off for him to hear it. A similar observance of saluting the sneezer must have prevailed in some Oriental countries, for in the Pali Buddhist Scriptures, Birth Story No. 42 enlarges on the danger of being eaten by a goblin if after a sneeze no one says, "Long life to you." The Japanese, however, do not seem to have any such custom, for there is a curious account preserved in native Japanese sources of an Italian missionary, Father Sidotti, who had come to Japan about 1708, and having been almost immediately arrested and imprisoned, was cross-questioned at length by a board of commissioners. The Japanese reporter tells us how:

> Once on seeing a commissioner sneeze, he looked at him and repeated a form of incantation, and then turning to the interpreter, he said: "The weather and climate are cold, can't you put on another coat? My countrymen are careful about sneezing. Formerly people in my land were everywhere seized with the sneezing sickness."[1]

[1] *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, Vol. IX, p. 160.

It seems clear that the Japanese commissioners were surprised, because they themselves had no similar custom.

Still another surviving usage which may claim a very ancient pedigree is that of spitting in one's hands or spitting on a coin for luck. It was prevalent in Aubrey's time. "It is a common use in London," he says, "and perhaps over a great part of England, for apple women, oyster women, etc., and some butchers, to spit on the money which they first receive in the morning, which they call good handsell"; and again "country boys and fellows (I believe all England over) when they prepare themselves to go to cuffs, before they strike, they do spit in their hands, i.e. for good luck to their endeavours." Such spitting is described by Pliny as a *praefiscine*, a safeguard against fascination, but there is much to suggest that it was rather a deprecation of the ill will of a possibly offended deity who might be resentful either of boastfulness, or of the neglect of forms that ought to have been observed. The idea latent in this spitting upon oneself (*εἰς κόλπον πτύειν*) a phrase which recurs in Theophrastus, Theocritus and other sources, seems analogous to that of striking one's breast. The latter gesture is a blow, or a symbolical castigation, directed against oneself, the former a manifestation of contempt for one's own person. It is possible, of course, that "the transfer of saliva from the spitter," as Hartland has urged, was sometimes regarded by more primitive peoples as "a gift of a portion of himself which is thus put in the power of the recipient as a pledge of

good will." This may have been the underlying significance when saliva was used in such peaceful offices as healing or making brothers, but in classical times to spit at a man was surely not construed as a friendly act. In Tertullian we have such phrases as *fumantes aras despuimus*, and we read how St. Anthony put the devil to flight by spitting at him. Even if the "blowing away" of demons (*exsufflatio*) was the phrase more usually employed, the two acts of blowing and spitting in detestation are very closely allied and are sometimes coupled together in the same sentence. I am inclined, therefore, to think that the boy who spits upon his hands or upon the coin that has been given him is only perpetuating, though of course he does not realize it, a practice which two thousand years ago was more clearly realized to be an act of self-abasement and an apology. We learn from Theocritus that for greater efficacy it was usual to spit into one's bosom three times, and Aubrey mentions that "when the Irish do praise your horse they spit upon it, perhaps three times." Nothing is more obscure than the ultimate origin of such customs as these, but it is possible that in this particular instance the idea of averting Nemesis by subsequent depreciation of the object to which honour had been paid has a fair claim to be regarded as providing the most rational explanation.

CHAPTER III

THE CHURCH IN CONFLICT

THE superstitions just noticed are interesting for their antiquity, but they are harmless enough, at any rate in the form in which they now survive. The most rigid moralist would hardly go out of his way to denounce the piercing of egg-shells, the spitting on a coin, the use of fasting saliva for healing, or the salutations which attend upon a sneeze. Even those who now follow these customs do not more than half believe in them. For the most part they are only imitating what they have seen others do, without troubling to ask themselves why. But in the fifth and sixth centuries, under the Roman Empire which was fast breaking up and was suffering not a little from the moral confusion engendered by a thousand divergent philosophies and cults, the case was very different. One has to remember the almost incredible difficulty of Christianizing those pagan and uncultured peoples of the North and West who were wedded to their traditional customs and especially to the observance of certain days and seasons in honour of Nordic and other deities. These were marked by carousals and debauches and by rites which were often impious and cruel. It was not as if peace and a settled

government existed anywhere. To make good Christians out of such unpromising material there was needed a supply of earnest and exemplary priests. But the difficulty of testing and training candidates for the ministry must have been enormous in the disturbed political conditions which everywhere prevailed. We are accustomed to speak of the "Apostles" of this or that region, and an impression is given that the inhabitants having, in some sort, accepted Christianity because their ruler now professed it, the whole work of conversion was completed. If, therefore, monstrous vices and barbarous excesses of all kinds are heard of afterwards, it is assumed that the blame must rest with the clergy. No doubt they may, in some measure, be responsible, but before judgment is pronounced, it would be very desirable to know how these same clergy were recruited, how they were prepared for their work, how numerous they were in proportion to the people among whom they laboured, and how far it was possible for them to build churches and to gather their flock together to listen to the word of God. It is only by reading some such chronicle as, let us say, the *Historia Francorum* of Gregory of Tours that any adequate conception can be obtained of the state of turbulence and unrest in which the inroads of the barbarians had left the whole of the Western Empire. The miracle is that any sort of Christianity should have taken firm hold.

We must, then, be prepared to find that in this soil the superstitions which had long flourished unchecked could not easily be eradicated. Rather

they often grew and multiplied. Some, clearly enough, had their origin in the pagan practices traditional with the race—Franks or Kelts or Goths, as the case might be—and were perpetually recalled to memory by familiar words and phrases even in the uncultured language which they spoke. Others came in the wake of Christianity itself, owing their existence in large measure to the prevalence of extreme credulity and to the lack among the clergy of any critical sense or scientific knowledge. It was, however, the former class of these superstitions which constituted the gravest danger to the faith of the newly converted, and it was against this class that, in the beginning, the efforts of holy Bishops and enlightened teachers were mainly directed. We can take but an isolated illustration or two from a record which would fill volumes.

Probably no ecclesiastic was more energetic in consolidating the faith which had been planted in western Europe than St. Cæsarius, Bishop of Arles, who died in 542. We possess a considerable number of the sermons which, in a notably simple and popular style, he preached to his people, and they suffice to show us clearly what were then regarded as the principal dangers menacing the practice of true Christianity and, consequently, the salvation of souls. Again and again St. Cæsarius comes back upon the prevalence of pagan superstitions. He tells his auditors that the temples of the idols must be destroyed, that their altars must be thrown down, that the trees which were the objects of a sacrilegious worship must be burnt, so that no trace be left of

them. There are those, he says, who are not only reluctant to take these vigorous measures, but who, when the temples have already been demolished, want to build them up again. In regard to such people, he insists, leniency is out of place. You must warn them, you must storm at them, you must chastise them. "If they show no amendment, flog them if you can; if this has no effect, cut off their hair, and if they still persist, shackle them with chains, so that those whom the grace of Christ cannot restrain may be kept from mischief by iron fetters." [1] It should be noticed that the offenders whom the Bishop so vehemently denounces were baptized Christians, not pagans, for while he upbraids them for "flouting God and embracing the devil," he asks: "Why did these wretched people ever come to the Church? Why did they receive the sacrament of baptism, if they were bent on afterwards returning to the sacrilegious worship of their idols?"

In the sermons of Cæsarius we find enumerated a number of abuses, which also recur frequently in the synodal decrees and in the Penitentials of the four following centuries. He denounces, for example, the clamour and the tumultuous scenes which took place whenever an eclipse of the moon occurred. The popular idea was that some hostile power threatened to consume the moon and that the orb of night could be aided in her efforts to resist by supplications to the ancient deities and by encouraging

[1] See the sermon edited by Dom G. Morin in the *Revue Bénédictine*, Vol. XIII (1896), p. 205.

shouts. So they cried out: "*Vince luna*," etc., "Hold on, old Moon, and win the day!" Caesarius denounces this superstition as gravely sinful. It was a sacrilegious impertinence to imagine that men could come to the rescue of the heavenly bodies [1]; or, as St. Maximus of Turin had said in one of his sermons a century earlier, "just as if God were incapable of saving His moon unless men lent Him their aid." [2] But as an illustration of the persistence of such practices, it is certainly curious to find in Aubrey's *Remains of Gentilisme*, written about 1686, a reference to "the wild Irish or Welsh, who, during eclipses, run about beating pans, thinking their clamour and vexations available to the assistance of the higher orbs." Aubrey quotes this from the book *Advice to a Son* by his contemporary, Francis Osborne. Furthermore, Aubrey reminds us that there is an allusion to the same practice in Juvenal's sixth satire (ll. 440–4) where, in describing a garrulous and loud-voiced woman, the poet compares the din to a jangling of pots and pans.

> Ten thousand clamorous bells together rung
> Match not the eternal clatter of her tongue;

and he adds, "*Una laboranti poterit succurrere lunæ*"—"by herself alone she would be able to rescue the moon from the throes of an eclipse."

Another prominent superstition frequently denounced by Caesarius was the cult of the Thursday (Thor's day or *dies Jovis*). Thor was the god of thunder and so was Jove, and it is difficult to decide

[1] *Migne*, P.L., Vol. XXXIX, c. 2239.
[2] *Ibid.*, Vol. LVII, cc. 256–8.

whether it was the Latin or the Nordic tradition which counted for most in making the Thursday a popular holiday and in some sense a rival to Sunday. It must be something more than a coincidence that in Rome, down to the time of Pope Gregory II (715–31), there were no stations or Masses appointed for Thursdays even in Lent. In any case St. Cæsarius inveighs against "the wretched people who, in honour of Jove, will do no work on Thursdays, though beyond doubt they are deterred neither by shame nor fear from working on Sundays." He urges his hearers to have no social relations with the culprits, and if they have authority over them, as in the case of a man's own children or slaves, to punish them and, if they do not amend, to flog them, that fear of pain in their bodies may have some effect with those who are so regardless of the salvation of their souls.[1] The penitential discipline in Merovingian times was severe, at least in theory, and at the Synod of Narbonne in 589 it was enacted that Christians who practised this abstention from work on Thursdays were to be excluded from the Church and to do penance for a year.

In another of his sermons St. Cæsarius, in view of the approaching festival of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, exhorts all to prepare to celebrate the feast devoutly, adding: "But this above all I pray, and by the terrible day of judgment I solemnly charge you to warn those belonging to you on no account to bathe at night or in the early morning of St. John's day, either in fountains, or in marshes or in

[1] Migne, P.L., Vol. XXXIX, c. 2240.

the rivers, because this is a survival of heathenism which, unfortunately, remains with us still."[1] He adds the rather surprising statement that it was a very common thing for people to lose their lives in these sacrilegious ablutions ("*frequentissime in ista sacrilega lavatione morimur*") warning them, if they were reckless of their souls, at least to take care of their bodies. The eve of St. John the Baptist's day was, of course, midsummer night, and we may learn from Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* the great variety and the wide distribution of the superstitions connected with that nature feast. Whether it was for bathing or to dance round bonfires and leap through the flames, or to carry home branches of trees, or to sit in the church porch to see the apparitions of those who would die in the parish during the following year, it was beyond doubt a widespread custom for young people to spend the night in the open air.

But what seems more than anything else to have drawn down the stern rebuke, not only of St. Cæsarius of Arles but of numberless other bishops and preachers for many centuries to come, was the practice of consulting soothsayers and of performing rites of propitiation, of healing, or of inquiring into the future, at reputed holy wells, or at trees supposed to be frequented by the fairies and other spirits. Many seem to have thought that there was room for these things in the life of a good Christian, but Cæsarius told them plainly "though a man fast and pray and is constant in visiting the church, and give

[1] Migne, P.L., Vol. XXXIX, c. 2268.

large alms, and even crucify his wretched body by practices of penance, nothing of these things will help him so long as he will not forsake his sacrilegious rites, because this sacrilegious observance overwhelms and extinguishes all that he does of good." [1] The number of irrational and often degrading usages which the people retained as a legacy from their heathen forefathers almost passes belief. A partial list known as the *Indiculus Superstitionum*, under thirty heads, was drawn up in Germany in the eighth century, but with regard to several of the entries we can only conjecture what was precisely meant by the strange names which occur in it. It is clear, however, that in every part of Christendom these remnants of paganism were regarded as a grave danger which threatened to sap the devotional life of the Church. Not only in France, Germany and England, but at the council "in Trullo" held at Constantinople in 692, we find enactments of the same type. There are general prohibitions directed against those who consult sorcerers and diviners, use or sell amulets or charms, draw omens from the clouds, etc., but particular practices are also specified and condemned; for example the lighting of fires before houses and workshops at the time of the new moon that people may dance around the fires, or again the disorderly celebration of the kalends, the *festa* (feast in honour of Pan), the *brumalia* (in honour of Bacchus), the revels when men dress as women and women as men, and

[1] Migne, P.L., Vol. XXXIX, c. 2190; and see Arnold, *Cæsarius von Arelate*, pp. 166–82.

so on. In England, before the Norman Conquest, we find such an enactment as this of King Cnut:

> And we earnestly forbid every heathenism—heathenism is that men worship idols; that is that they worship heathen gods, and the sun or the moon, fire or rivers, water-springs or stones or forest trees of any kind, or love witchcraft, or encourage death-dealing in any wise.[1]

It must be remembered that "worship" does not quite mean to pay divine honours, but it certainly implies some form of religious cult. So again in the following ordinance, which is attributed to King Edgar:

> And we enjoin that every priest zealously promote Christianity, and totally extinguish all heathenism; and forbid well worshippings and necromancies, and divinations and enchantments and man-worshippings, and the vain practices which are carried on with various spells, and tree worshippings and stone worshippings, and that devil's craft whereby children are drawn through the earth, and the vain practices which are carried on on the night of the (new) year.

This celebration of the New Year had always been a source of difficulty. It was a popular festival attended by every sort of excess. The *strenae* (presents) which were then given "for the sake of the omen" were themselves denounced by the sterner Christian moralists as a sort of participation in heathen rites. Moreover, the Romans, in old republican days, had invented a new deity, "Strenia,"

[1] See Liebermann, *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, Vol. I, p. 312; and cf. the headings "Heidentum" and "Zauber" in Liebermann's glossary.

to preside over these gifts, and they attributed to her the faculty of making people "strenuous." In vain the Church had striven to rescue her faithful subjects from the contamination of these disorders. She had at one time appointed the first of January as a fast instead of a feast, and later we find in Gaul, Germany and Spain that the service-books on this day provide a second special Mass *ad prohibendum ab idolis*, i.e. against idolatrous practices. St. Augustine, in a New Year sermon, exhorts his hearers: "In order that you may follow your Redeemer who ransomed you with His blood, be careful not to let yourselves be merged in the crowd of the Gentiles by copying their principles and their practices. They give Christmas-boxes (*strenae*), do you give alms. They are all captivated by the carols of debauchery, see that you are entranced by the music of the Scriptures. They run to the theatres, do you hasten to the churches. They yield themselves up to intemperance; it is your part to fast and be abstemious. If you cannot fast to-day, at least dine soberly." [1]

But the evil went on, and was perhaps even aggravated by mummeries of a more baleful significance. At the Synod of Auxerre towards the close of the sixth century, the faithful were forbidden, on the first of January, to dress themselves up as the pagans do, in the semblance of an old woman or a cow or a stag, and from the pseudo-Theodorian Penitential we learn that they used the skins of animals for this purpose, while the beast's head covered their own. Theodore is credited with

[1] Migne, P.L., Vol. XXXVIII, c. 1025.

imposing a penance of three years for this, describing it as a devilry,[1] and the Auxerre Synod finds something diabolical even in the exchange of presents. Numerous other ordinances could be quoted to a similar effect, but the mischief, nevertheless, went on, and to this day *le jour de l'an* with its *étrennes* (which is, of course, the very word—*strena*) is kept as the great Christmas holiday throughout France and in some other parts of Europe.

Naturally the burial of the dead was another matter in which it was difficult to persuade the converted barbarians to relinquish their immemorial usages. The two first headings of the *Indiculus Superstitionum* are concerned with "the sacrilegious rites" performed at the graves of the dead. Animals seem to have been offered in sacrifice at such an interment and some of the most treasured belongings of the deceased were often buried with him. Banquets and carousals were held at the graveside, and divinces professed to obtain insight into the future. There is mention also of unworthy Christian priests who were not ashamed to participate in these pagan rites. In England we hear of a curious practice of "burning corn, where a man has died, to ensure the health of those who survive" and a penance of five years is assigned for such an offence.[2] Another strange Anglo-Saxon superstition—though

[1] The fact that the Penitential in this form did not emanate from Theodore is of no particular consequence. Thorpe, *Ancient Laws and Institutes*, Vol. II, p. 34, prints it from an English MS. of earlier date than the Conquest.

[2] Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, Vol. III, p. 190.

this is not connected with burials—was that a woman, to cure her child of a fever, would expose it on the roof of a house or put it into an oven. For this a penance of five years on bread and water would hardly seem an excessive punishment.

So far we have only dealt with those purely pagan superstitions which the Christian clergy and missionaries, much to their credit, seem resolutely to have discountenanced and tried to suppress. The situation, however, was an extremely difficult one. The rude, uneducated populations with whom they had to deal were so wedded to the time-honoured festivities which marked the different seasons of the year, and were so accustomed to meet each other in certain places for some sort of spectacular processions or revels, that it was found impossible to break them of the habit. The remedy which suggested itself was a compromise by which a Christianized substitute was offered them, corresponding more or less in time and place to the celebrations it was desired to abolish. It may have been a necessary expedient, and a number of learned and holy ecclesiastics commended it,[1] but it also had its dangers. The people who attended the procession at Candlemas instead of the Lupercalia, or who crowded to the feast of "St. Peter's Chair at Antioch" on February 22, instead of the Cara Cognatio, would be apt to bring with them the same spirit in which they had entered upon the old pagan cele-

[1] See, for example, Vacandard in his *Études de Critique*, etc., 3rd series, pp. 146–51. He cites Gregory Thaumaturgus, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, etc.

brations, and this was one of relaxation and enjoyment rather than of piety. In spite of the enthusiasm of St. Paulinus of Nola and his appreciation of the solemnity with which the vigil of St. Felix was honoured, it is plain, even from his description, that the occasion gave rise to many scandalous incidents. We cannot on this account say that the night watch (*vigiliæ*) before great festivals, which was so marked a feature of Christian festivals in the early Church, must be entirely condemned, but it unquestionably lent itself to abuses, and it is difficult to decide how far familiarity with certain pagan usages and with the practice of "incubation"—as, for example, in the temple of Æsculapius at Epidaurus—may have had an influence in prompting Christians to spend the night before the shrines of their own saints. Whether they owed anything to prevalent customs or not, we cannot call these vigils superstitious, for they were fully recognized by the Church as a legitimate form of devotion. But there is always a tendency to carry such practices to extremes, ending, in course of time, in excesses and extravagances which cannot be defended. An interesting example of the beginnings of such a development may be quoted from the life of St. Melania the Younger, a document which has only become fully known in recent years. Speaking of Rome itself in the year 399, the biographer says:

> Now it happened that the day was at hand for the solemn commemoration of St. Laurence. In her great ardour of spirit the most blessed damsel was eager to go and keep the whole night with watchings in the basilica of the holy martyr. But this her parents would not per-

mit because she was expecting her confinement and was too weakly and delicate of body to support the labour of watchings. So she, fearing her parents, yet desiring to find favour with God, remained there watching in the oratory of her own house, continuing upon her knees until morning.

At dawn her father sent eunuchs to inquire how she had slept. They found her still praying, but she bribed them not to betray her and at an early hour the young wife was herself allowed to go with her mother to the martyr-church of St. Laurence where more devotions were performed. We can hardly be surprised to learn that on her return home "she was seized with the throes of child-birth, and amid agonies of pain she was brought even to the point of death. A boy was born prematurely, who was baptized that same day. The next day his soul passed to God."

This example shows us clearly how strong was the example of the *παννυχίς* (the all-night vigil) which, so far as the name goes, meets us frequently in the Greek classics. There were unquestionably some practices of a more or less religious character familiar to every one living in a semi-pagan society which obtained a recognition in Christian circles even if the Church never formally made them her own. There was nothing very harmful for example in the central idea of the above-mentioned rite of incubation, always understanding that the appeal was made by Christians to a martyr or a saint, and not to a pagan deity. In its essential features incubation consisted in sleeping in the temple, after due preparation and certain prescribed ceremonies, with

the object of being favoured in a dream by an apparition of the divinity, and obtaining either a revelation as to the future or the healing of some disease. Undoubtedly we have something very similar to this in the accounts which have been left us of the sufferers who visited the shrines of SS. Cosmas and Damian at Constantinople, or that of St. Artemius, or that of St. Therapion, or that of SS. Cyrus and John in Egypt.[1] How far we can consider this procedure to have been ecclesiastically sanctioned is not very clear, but there is no indication of any liturgical text or formula appointed for working these cures. In western Europe the traces of incubation are relatively few, but the famous Purgatory of St. Patrick at Lough Derg in Ireland offers us something of the same character, though the expiation of sins, rather than the recovery of bodily health, was the principal motive of the pilgrimage. There can be no doubt that bishops and clergy commended recourse to St. Patrick's Purgatory. One can only say that the combats with demons and the visions of suffering souls which were alleged to be the lot of those who passed the night in the cave suggest a very superstitious atmosphere.

A more certain instance of the adoption of heathen precedents meets us in the case of the Masses for the dead offered on the third, seventh and thirtieth day after the funeral. The observance of these or closely analogous intervals by pagans in their funeral rites long before the coming of our Lord is

[1] See Delehaye, *Les Recueils antiques de Miracles des Saints* (1923).

beyond question. Both in Greece and Rome, the third, the eighth or ninth, and the thirteenth or fortieth day after interment were marked by a renewal of celebrations in honour of the dead. It will not seem in any way reprehensible that the Church, while substituting her own august sacrifice for profane banquets, immolations of animals and libations of blood, should have observed these particular intervals which pagan usage had made familiar. At the same time the comparison does show that even in the great centres of Christian life bishops and clergy were, in some measure, influenced by the observances of the heathen world around them, and it is easy to understand that in the missionary regions of Gaul, Germany and Britain the influence exerted by pagan customs was apt to take a much more objectionable form. A single example will suffice to illustrate this point. I choose it because it is closely related to the practice which has just been noted. In the *Capitula* of Archbishop Hincmar of Reims, belonging to the year 852, we find it enjoined

that no one of our priests when they assemble for the anniversary celebration of any dead person, or for that of the thirtieth (this was of course the "month's mind"), seventh or third day after death, on any account make free to get intoxicated, nor propose drinking for the love of the saints, or for that of the soul of the deceased, nor constrain others to drink, nor yield to persuasion to swill liquor himself (*ingurgitare*), nor join in wild cheering and laughter, nor relate frivolous anecdotes or sing ballads, nor allow buffooneries, with men racing and girls dancing, to go on in his presence, nor permit those demon

masks which they call *talamones*, to be used before him for this is deviltry.

The same kind of protest was again and again made in connection with the orgies which often marked the night preceding burial. The "wake," in a mitigated form, survives to this day in Ireland and in some parts of Europe, but in the Middle Ages it prevailed almost everywhere and was everywhere productive of grave abuses. The Council of London in 1345, while stating that wakes had been introduced by the devotion of the faithful in order that friends keeping watch beside the corpse even in a private house might say prayers and make intercession for the departed soul, declares that the custom "by superstitious excesses" has so degenerated into a scandalous orgy "that all prayer is disregarded and the meeting becomes only an occasion of licence and revelry." Centuries earlier Regino of Prüm had declared that profane songs, devil-begotten, were sung on such occasions with uproarious jesting and dancing, while he complains also that these things had been introduced from paganism.

It is not to be doubted that many earnest and influential ecclesiastics spoke out strongly in condemnation of these superstitious practices, and more especially against the worship of fountains, trees, groves and sacred stones, against the vows that were made there and the lights with which they were honoured, but their efforts were hampered by the generally low level of intelligence, and by the deeply ingrained belief in omens, sorcery, rain-makers and such-like.

CHAPTER IV

THE MISCHIEF OF CREDULITY

ALTHOUGH a great part of the superstitious beliefs and practices of the Middle Ages had their origin in paganism, it cannot be disputed that much which the modern reader is most disposed to condemn under that head grew up within the Church itself. The ready acceptance of spurious and often preposterous relics, the multiplication of miracles and the disposition to attribute everything unwonted, whether good or bad, to the direct intervention either of God or the devil; the efficacious virtue attached to pilgrimages, extravagant devotions and extreme forms of asceticism; the credit given to what purported to be the revelations made to holy people, whether by our Saviour, His Blessed Mother or any of the Saints; the substitution of trial by ordeal for a legal judgment based on evidence—all these things, and many more which cannot be particularized here, have contributed to the impression that the mediæval world was ignorant, gullible and foolish to a degree which fully justified the later denunciations of the reformers. That not a few of the beliefs just specified deserve to be called superstitious cannot be denied. They were superstitious because, though they professed to honour God, they honoured Him

irrationally. The real source of the trouble was the utter lack of the critical faculty—inevitable, perhaps, in the dearth of all historical apparatus—but also the too great readiness to believe that God was prompt to interfere in all the occurrences of daily life.

Let me take an illustration or two in the matter of the veneration of relics. The trustfulness with which an alleged relic was accepted as authentic is strikingly made manifest by an incident in the life of St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury and Doctor of the Church, rightly held to be not only one of the holiest, but also one of the most learned and experienced men of his day.

At some time in 1106, while St. Anselm was at Rouen, a certain Ilgyrus, who was devoted to the Saint, returned from the Crusades and told him, among other things, of the relics he had brought back, explaining also how he had come to acquire them. Amongst these relics he prided himself particularly on certain hairs of our Blessed Lady which, he said, had been given him by the Patriarch of Antioch at a time when he (Ilgyrus) held high command there. Two of these hairs he had determined to give to St. Anselm himself and two others to his former Abbey of Bec. Eadmer, St. Anselm's secretary, was present at Rouen at the time and has left an account of what Ilgyrus said:

> These were twelve in all [he told the Archbishop] given me by the said Patriarch, who affirmed that they had been torn out by Our Lady herself at the time when the sword of sorrow pierced her heart as she stood beside the Cross of her Son. And this, the Patriarch

declared, he had found attested in certain ancient records which they held to be of great authority preserved in the archives of the Church over which he presided.

St. Anselm, Eadmer goes on, was enraptured (*admodum exhilaratus*) at these tidings. As the precious relics had been left behind at Chartres, a band of monks was sent as an escort to fetch them, and the Saint, together with the Archbishop of Rouen, and all the canons and clergy of the city, went out in solemn procession to meet the treasure. There is no hint of any attempt being made to control the statements of Ilgyrus and the Patriarch. Providence had sent this priceless boon, and they had no other thought but to thank God for the favour.

There are many details in Eadmer's account which lend themselves to criticism, but I must content myself here with saying that not only is the idea of the Blessed Virgin tearing her hair as she stood beneath the Cross repugnant to our conception of her as the Mother of the Redeemer, submissive in all things to His holy will, but the subsequent collection of these individual hairs from the trampled soil of Calvary is an incredible thing. Moreover, there were at least fifty, if not a hundred, churches in the Middle Ages which claimed to possess similar relics of her hair (*crines Beatæ Virginis*). The memorials of the Blessed Virgin which were preserved, for example in the Royal Abbey of Westminster, are thus enumerated in the official inventory (fifteenth century) copied by Fleet.

St. Edward, king and confessor, presented many pieces of the dress of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the linen gar-

ment which she wove herself, of the window recess in which the angel stood when he saluted her, of her milk, of her hair, of her shoes and of her bed; also the girdle (*zonam*) which she worked with her own hands and used to wear and which she left to St. Thomas at her Assumption. King Athelstan gave a certain veil of the Holy Mary the Virgin. Offa, King of the East Saxons, presented a cypress and a piece of her tomb.

It is recognized that the "milk" of the Blessed Virgin was simply an exudation of galactite from the cave in Egypt where the Holy Family are said to have passed the night. F. de Mély and others have investigated the subject thoroughly and have shown that all over Europe specimens of this substance were venerated under the same extravagant description.

There can be no question that a study of mediæval relics leaves a deplorable impression of the credulity which prevailed universally even amongst the most eminent and learned of ecclesiastics. In the case of St. Anselm and Eadmer, as in that of another great relic hunter, St. Hugh of Lincoln, it is plain that there was no trace of a mercenary motive in their zeal for acquiring these memorials of the saints. Such men as they were not thinking of the offerings of the faithful which might be attracted to a popular shrine. The relics were a real stimulus to their devotion, and they felt that to have these memorials beside them was like walking in the company of the dear friends of God. The motive was very similar to that which appears so clearly in the early catacomb interments when everybody tried to be buried in close contiguity to some highly venerated martyr. Such instincts

lie deep in human nature. As Dr. J. A. MacCulloch writes in the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*: "The supernatural virtues of relics, originating in such beliefs as have been referred to, may be traced through a series of examples in all religions and in all degrees of civilization, beginning with the lowest savages." The supposed relics of Buddha are, of course, particularly famous. Even in modern times, we find something closely analogous in unexpected quarters. When that strange evangelist, William Huntington, a converted coalheaver and ostensibly a Calvinistic Methodist, died in 1813, "extraordinary prices were paid by his people for some article to keep in memory of him," his chair, for example, fetched no less than sixty guineas.[1]

For the rationalist the relic inventories of the great pre-Reformation shrines form a happy-hunting ground yielding abundant material upon which satire and scorn can be lavished without fear of rebuke. There was hardly any physical object mentioned in the Gospels, or even in the Old Testament, which some church or other did not claim to possess. There was hardly an incident in our Lord's life which apparently had not left behind it some memorial for the veneration of Christians a thousand years afterwards. Our Saviour wept at the grave of Lazarus.

[1] See Ebenezer Hooper, *The Celebrated Coalheaver* (1871). Huntington's epitaph which he dictated himself before his death, ran as follows: "Here lies the Coalheaver, beloved of his God and abhorred of men. The Omniscient Judge at the Grand Assize shall ratify and confirm him to the confusion of many thousands, for England and its Metropolis shall know that there hath been a prophet among them."

We are asked to believe that the tears were gathered up by angels and preserved as relics. There was one at Selincourt, for visiting which Pope Clement VI granted an indulgence. There was a still more famous tear at Vendôme, over which, in the eighteenth century, an acrimonious controversy raged. The protagonists were two of the most distinguished ecclesiastics in France, the Abbé J. B. Thiers who denounced resort to this shrine as a scandal, and the great Benedictine scholar Mabillon, who was constrained to defend it, even if somewhat half-heartedly, because it belonged to an Abbey of his own Order. Moreover, there were other "holy tears," at St. Maximin in Provence, at Orleans, and elsewhere. Then the monastery of St. Médard at Soissons claimed to possess a tooth of our Lord which the child Christ had lost with other first teeth at the age of nine. It is noteworthy that Guibert, Abbot of Nogent, came forward at the beginning of the twelfth century to stigmatize this pretension along with other figments of the same kind; but such protests were rare and the abuse was widespread.

If there is any corner of the world where we might expect authentic relics to have been gathered it would be at the mother church of Christendom, the basilica of the Lateran, and in particular in the chapel of the Sancta Sanctorum annexed to it, which bears the proud inscription—

NON EST IN TOTO SANCTIOR ORBE LOCUS.[1]

Now an inventory of these relics, made in the

[1] "There is not in the whole world a spot more hallowed."

eleventh century, has been preserved to us by John the Deacon, part of which runs as follows :

And there is the rod of Aaron which had blossomed, and the tables of the Testament, and the rod of Moses with which he twice struck the flint and the waters flowed forth. Also there are relics there of Our Lord's cradle, and of the five barley loaves and the two fishes. Also the table of Our Lord. The cloth with which He wiped the feet of His disciples. The seamless garment which Mary the Virgin made for her Son our Lord Jesus Christ, which at His death the soldiers cast lots for and it was never divided. So long as Our Saviour shall preserve it here no heresy or rupture of the faith shall last for any long space of time. The purple garment of the same Saviour and Redeemer. Two phials of the blood and water from the side of our Lord, etc. etc.

Let me notice here the mention of the seamless garment, upon which, clearly, such emphasis is laid that we cannot suppose that the relic so described was merely a snippet from the vesture worn by our Lord. Unfortunately the "Holy Coat" preserved at Treves, which is said to have been venerated there ever since the time of St. Helen, also claims to be the authentic seamless garment for which the soldiers cast lots. Moreover, there was another "Holy Coat" at Argenteuil, but the defenders of the Treves tradition declare that this must have been an outer garment. What is certain is that in the case of no one of these fabrics supposed to have been connected with our Lord's life on earth, or with that of the Blessed Virgin, is there any reliable evidence which takes us further back than the Carolingian epoch, and

hardly ever so far even as that. On the other hand the same object of pious veneration is over and over again found entered in different inventories of churches far remote from each other, often with descriptions which preclude the possibility of the relic having been divided. Modern critical scholarship, for very sound reasons, contests the authenticity of many relics in all parts of the world which are still made an object of pilgrimage by devotees, who visit them and pray before them with simple faith. There is nothing to suggest that those who accept unquestioningly traditions which seem to be guaranteed by ecclesiastical authority, are guilty of any culpable superstition. It is not for them to pronounce judgment. But we may admit that not a few famous relics can supply no serious archæological evidence to justify the veneration with which they have been regarded for several centuries. Not only was St. John the Baptist's skull declared to be preserved simultaneously in more than one sacred treasury, but even if we admit the contention advanced in Cardinal Wiseman's essay that it had been cut into at least three portions, it is not easy to believe that the same explanation holds in the case of the Precursor's index finger. We have a detailed description of the whole right hand said to be preserved in Muscovy, but at the same period Pope Calixtus III granted an indulgence to the church of Mottisfont (Hants), in which, to quote the Papal decree, "are very many most precious relics of saints, including the finger of St. John Baptist with which he pointed to the Saviour of the human race." More-

over, the same index finger was also in Malta, and in Bohemia, and at the Church of St. Jean du Doigt in Brittany, as well as in quite a number of other places.

On the other hand, if there were some thirty or more nails exhibited in different parts of Europe which all purported to be the actual nails with which our Lord was crucified, we have, at least in one or two of these cases, an explanation which shows how this multiplication originated. A pilgrim obtained a facsimile which had touched the nail preserved at Santa Croce in Rome, or which contained filings which had been taken from it. Returning to his own country he presented it to some church where it was treated as a quasi-relic. Accurate descriptions, however, were rarely taken down in writing, and even if such a note was ever made, it easily got lost. Hence it constantly happened that in the course of a few generations, the counterfeit, without conscious fraud, was taken for an original. No doubt the wish was the father to the thought, and each church was eager to glorify its possessions and to attract remunerative visitors, but the mentality of medieval folk was such that it would not strike them as incredible that even the most precious devotional treasure should find its way into a remote province without attracting attention. They were so used to believe in miracles that in matters connected with religion the majority were prepared to acquiesce in the unexpected, and no serious misgivings occurred to them to disturb their peace of mind.

From the point of view of the Reformers all Popish relics, ceremonies and miracles were tainted with

superstition, and it cannot be disputed that in a good many cases there was justification for such an indictment. But with regard to reputed miracles, the universal ignorance of physical science and of the most elementary principles of medicine and hygiene as now understood, offer much excuse for this propensity to take refuge in preternatural explanations. It also sometimes happens that we are able at the present day to vindicate statements of fact which only a century or two back would have been scoffed at as unscrupulous inventions. For example, in more than one chronicle belonging to the epoch of our Angevin monarchs it is recorded as an astounding miracle that loaves, being cut open after baking, ran with blood. The portent was universally attributed at the time to the neglect of Sunday observance. The loaves must have been kneaded during hours when servile work was forbidden. The conscientiously truthful author of the *Magna Vita* of St. Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, tells us in detail of one such case. It came to light on the 8th September 1200 at St. Omers, through which the Saint and his chaplain, who is the narrator, were passing on their way back to England. A great sensation had been caused in the town by the discovery that all the loaves in a certain batch of bread recently baked dripped with blood when they were cut or broken open. One was brought to the Saint that he might see for himself. The chaplain tore a piece off, and, as he states, "blood at once ran from the place where it was broken, just as would happen if you cut the flesh of a man or of some live animal." However, the chaplain also tells us some-

thing else which goes far to explain the mystery. The loaf brought to them was a loaf of fermented bread; but he adds, "there were other loaves baked in the same oven at the same time, which were made of unleavened dough. These unleavened loaves remained clean and sweet and nothing extraordinary was seen in them; but of the fermented bread blood ran from every loaf when it was cut or broken."

Now there was, of course, no means in those days of telling whether the red fluid which ran from the loaves was really blood. It is practically certain that this crimson exudation was due to some bacillus introduced with the yeast. Whether it was the *bacillus prodigiosus* (the name is derived from its close resemblance to blood) which wrought the mischief in this case cannot be determined. There are other microscopic fungi which produce a similar effect, but even in relatively modern days phenomena of the same kind have been more than once observed and have been made the subject of scientific inquiry.[1] One has to remember that the use of insanitary foodstuffs often produced effects which are now rarely met with under modern conditions. For example, it seems certain that the epidemics of that strange disease which was called "St. Anthony's fire" were caused by "ergot," a fungoid growth liable to occur in cereals, more particularly in rye, during wet seasons. The symptoms and normal course of the disease were so remarkable that a cure was almost inevitably thought to be due to miracle. The same

[1] I have given references to some of these reports in *The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln* (1898), pp. 509–10.

Magna Vita of St. Hugh of Lincoln which has just been quoted furnishes an interesting description of the malady which is thoroughly borne out by medical observation of the few similar cases which have been reported in later times. St. Hugh's chaplain remarks:

In all these miracles the most marvellous feature is this. When the fire has been extinguished in the sufferer's limbs the flesh, or the skin, or any member which this consuming disease has gradually eaten away, is never in any case restored. But what is more extraordinary, where this raging conflagration has destroyed the limb and left nothing but the bare bone, there is given to the maimed parts that are left such health and soundness that you may see numbers of all ages and of both sexes with their arms consumed as far as the elbow or the shoulders, or their legs worn away up to and above the knees, still showing as much vigour as if they were in perfect health. So fully does the virtue of the Saint compensate the loss of the parts which are destroyed by the soundness of those that are preserved, that even the delicate internal organs, exposed though they are sometimes, the skin and flesh being stripped from the very ribs, do not readily suffer from cold or sustain further injury. The traces of the wounds are horribly apparent, but he who has been wounded suffers no pain. To all who look upon them they serve as a motive for fear as well as a spur to devotion.

The witness further adds that in nearly all cases the cure is worked by St. Anthony within seven days. If no relief is felt before that time the malady is generally fatal. Now all this agrees perfectly with what is recorded in the eighteenth century of a family in Suffolk who had been living on damaged wheat

or rye and had contracted some similar malady. The bones of the extremities became perfectly sphacelated, and the feet often fell off of themselves. "When I saw them," wrote the surgeon who reported the case, "they all seemed free from fever. One poor boy in particular looked as healthy and florid as possible and was sitting on the bed quite jolly and drumming with his stumps." [1] But there was no reason here to suppose that St. Anthony had miraculously intervened.

But the Middle Ages had, of course, their own crop of superstitions of a more commonplace order. The observance of lucky and unlucky days, though constantly denounced in sermons and moral treatises, seems to have been hardly less rife than it was in pagan Rome. If auguries and omens had no longer any sort of official sanction, they, nevertheless, retained a considerable hold upon the more ignorant peasantry. Belief in the evil eye, being linked up with Aristotelean physics, was justified as something not necessarily connected with magic but as the demonstrated effect of natural causes. So we find that even St. Thomas Aquinas accepts the baneful influence of the *oculus fascinans* as a fact beyond dispute.

> The eyes [he declares] infect the air which is in contact with them to a certain distance; in the same way as a new and clear mirror contracts a tarnish from the look of a *menstruata*, as Aristotle says (*De Somno et Vigil.*). So then when a soul is vehemently moved to wickedness, as occurs mostly in little old women, according to the

[1] *Op. cit.*, pp. 489–5.

above explanation, the countenance becomes venomous and hurtful, especially to children who have a tender and most impressionable body.[1]

Similarly St. Thomas seems to have been satisfied that the moon exercised considerable influence upon the mental states of certain weak-minded people,[2] being led to that view by the use of the word "lunatic" in St. Matthew's Gospel (iv. 24, and xvii. 14). Hence he remarks:

> Now it is manifest that the brain is the most moist of all the parts of the body, as Aristotle says (*De Parte Animalium*, Bk. II), wherefore it is the most subject to the action of the moon, the property of which is to move what is moist, and it is precisely in the brain that the animal forces culminate; wherefore the demons, according to certain phases of the moon, disturb man's imagination, when they observe that the brain is thereto disposed.[2]

Of course both these beliefs were of very ancient date, with what seemed overwhelming authority behind them, and they were accepted by many other learned Doctors besides Aquinas. For example, the Dominican, Peter of Tarentaise, who afterward became Pope as Innocent V, and was beatified, states: "There are some people who have burning eyes. If their gaze falls upon tender children it does them a mischief, so that they suffer nausea and throw up the food in their stomachs, all which is possible according to nature." The mere acceptance of beliefs which were so general and were alleged to be

[1] *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Quest. 114, Art. 4, ad. 3.
[2] *Ibid.*, Pt. I, Quest. 117, Art. 3, ad. 2.

founded on scientific principles could not in those days be justly imputed to anyone as a superstition, but there was superstition in plenty in the expedients which were popularly employed to counteract the effects of the evil eye.[1] Amulets were constantly worn shaped like horns, or like a hand, and frequently obscene in character. The idea seems to have been that such an object would attract to itself the evil influence and leave the wearer immune. Sprigs of certain herbs were employed for the same purpose, and in Cockayne's *Anglo-Saxon Leechdoms* we may read that mugwort (the *artemisia vulgaris*) "turneth away the eyes of evil men," besides being a protection against diabolical possession. In northern Spain a custom seems to have prevailed of tying fragments of looking-glass, or bits of foxskin or sheepskin round the necks of children to protect them against the evil eye. Archdeacon Martin de Arles in his treatise, *De Superstitionibus*, denounces the practice as both superstitious and useless, though he does not question the reality of the danger to which children were exposed from the glances of persons who possessed this fatal gift.

The booklet just mentioned enumerates a number of other superstitious practices which were prevalent at the close of the fifteenth century in the Kingdom of Navarre, though some of these were clearly of earlier origin. For example, the author pours out indignation upon an expedient which was resorted

[1] An immense amount of information regarding all this matter has been collected in F. T. Elworthy's book, *The Evil Eye*.

to in seasons of drought when rain was badly wanted. The country people, we are told, went to the parish church, carried off the statue of St. Peter and taking it to the river-side, ducked it in the water. So again we learn from him that when a young woman was brought to bed expecting her confinement, her friends abstracted the girdle she usually wore round her waist and carried it to the church. There they tied it round the gong and then rang the gong three times vigorously. This custom Martin condemns as grossly superstitious, but, incidentally, he also lets us know that it was usual on such occasions when a woman lay in childbirth to ring three peals upon the bells of the parish church. The Archdeacon declares that this was done to invite the neighbours to say three Aves for the young mother in her hour of danger and was a practice to be commended. In the same book we have many references to the written spells, then commonly in use. Like all formulæ of this kind they are almost devoid of meaning—a mere mumbo-jumbo. One such incantation, reputed to be effective against fevers, is cited by Martin in strong terms of reprobation. It ran :

Ananisapta firit mortem qui ludere quæris,
Et mala mors capiat, dum dicitur Ananisapta.

Nobody knew precisely what Ananisapta was or stood for, but it was said to be made up of the initial letters of the words Antidotum, Nazareni, Auferat, Necem, Intoxicationis, Sanctificet, Alimenta, Pocula, Trinitas, Alma, which, read together, can be made to give some sort of meaning in this sense : "May

the antidote of the Nazarene (i.e. Christ) banish a death from poisoning. May the kindly Trinity sanctify food and drink." This particular charm seems to have been widely circulated in Spain, but every European country was familiar with similar gibberish employed for the healing of diseases or the averting of contagion.

Even at the present day and especially on board ship the clergyman's black coat is apt to be regarded as ominous of disaster, and it must be owned that the prejudice is of ancient date. There has always been a disposition to look upon the parson as a Jonah. Thus another superstition animadverted upon by Archdeacon Martin is that a party of huntsmen setting out for a day's sport would turn back from their proposed expedition if they chanced to meet a priest or a friar at the start. No luck was to be expected after such an encounter. The author of *Dives and Pauper* recounts something similar as prevailing in the England of his day, but the point upon which he lays stress is that to avoid an evil omen the tonsured ecclesiastic must always be passed on the left hand. In illustration of this, Dives asks:

> What sayest thou of them that when they go a-hunting, or pass by the way, if they meet with a man of holy Church or of religion and namely with a friar, they will leave them on their left hand for by that they ween to speed the better, and the worse if they leave him on their right hand?

Then the writer tells a story of a "proud gettour" (gallant) riding from London who met two friars "walking on a dytche's brink in a footpath for to

flee the fowle and myry way." He says that "the gettour came riding in haste, crying with great boast 'on the left, frere; on the left, frere.'" The friars begged him to keep the horse-way as they kept the footway, "but he wolde have the friars on his left hand, and pressed in with his horse between the friars and the dytche, so nigh that he fell in."

One gathers from the tone of this interesting little treatise that many of these popular superstitions were taken seriously. For example, Dives asks again:

"What sayest thou of them that divine by the first day of the year, that is the first kalends of January, and by Christmas day what shall fall in the year following? That if it fall on the Sunday the winter following shall be good, and the summer good and dry and plenty of wine.[1] Oxen and sheep shall well wax and multiply. Old men and old women shall die and accord shall be made that year also?"

Pawper: "I say that it is open folly and witchcraft and full of high offence to the majesty of God."

Another popular superstition of the same kind is referred to thus:

Dives: "It is a common opinion among the Gentiles and others that all the year followeth the disposition of the twelve days in Christmas, so that the first month shall be such in weathering as the first day of the twelve days is, the second month as the second day is, and so forth all following."

Pawper: "That opinion is false and open folly."

Both these last quotations deal with old beliefs of

[1] This seems to suggest that about the year 1400 there was more wine made in England than is commonly realized.

which traces may be found much earlier. But in other directions, and particularly in the matter of piety, enthusiasts putting faith in what they believed to be supernatural revelations, frequently started devotional novelties. Thus we find Dives asking his mentor: "Is it lawful to trust in these fastings new found to flee sudden death?" In reply to which Pauper says he knew men "that had fasted such fasts seven years about" who nevertheless died miserably and without warning. One gathers from the dialogue that the new practice consisted in fasting the whole year through on that day of the week on which "Our Lady in Lent," i.e. the feast of the Annunciation, happened to fall, and continuing this fast for seven years. The writer classes it as a mere superstition, calling it "a nice fantasy and misbelief, full nigh witchcraft."

There were many of these devotional excesses, and though some were undoubtedly suppressed by ecclesiastical authority, others met with a certain amount of encouragement. For example, the practice of attaching supreme importance to the sight of the consecrated Host at the moment of the Elevation led to the grave abuse that many people considered that attendance at Mass consisted only in this. They waited outside gossiping in the churchyard and in a neighbouring tavern until the sanctus bell was heard or a hand-bell was rung for the purpose through the "low-side window;" then they crowded into the end of the church "to see the body of Christ," and, when this had been done, considered themselves free to go about their business. In every country in Europe

the same complaint was made, notably for example in the sermons of St. Bernardine of Siena and in the writings of the German scholar, Henry of Hesse. What was most regrettable was the circulation of little poems or prose summaries on "the virtues of the Mass" in which the greatest stress was laid upon the seeing "God's body," and spurious passages were adduced from St. Augustine and other Fathers declaring that during the day on which a man had looked upon the Host at Mass he should not lack food, or lose his sight, or meet with sudden death, and so on.[1] Moreover, there were other devotions far less authorized and justifiable than this to which, as we may see in the Primers used by layfolk, both manuscript and printed, extravagant indulgences were alleged to attach, nearly all of which were quite apocryphal.

In medicine again there was often a curious blending of religious and superstitious elements; as a specimen of which we may take a section from Mr. Cockayne's *Leechdoms*. It was no doubt older than the Norman Conquest.

If wens at the heart pain a man, let a maiden go to a spring, which runs directly eastward, and ladle up a cup full, moving the cup with the stream, and let her or him sing over it the Creed and the Paternoster, and then pour it into another vessel, and then ladle up some more, and again sing the Creed and the Paternoster and so manage as to have three cups full. Do so for nine days, soon it will be well with the man.

[1] See, for example, John *Myrc's Instructions for Parish Priests*, E.E.T.S., ll. 312–27.

We find a similar medley in the following recipe from the same source:

When first thou art told that thy cattle are lost, then say before thou say anything else, "Bethlehem is the name of the town in which Christ was born. It is far famed throughout all earth. So may this deed among men become patent and public through the Holy Rood of Christ. Amen."

Then say thy prayers thrice to the east, and say thrice, "May the Cross of Christ bring me back my beasts from the east." Then pray thrice to the west, and say thrice, "May the Cross of Christ bring me back my beasts from the west"; then pray thrice to the north and say thrice, "May the Cross of Christ bring me back my beasts from the north. It was lost and is found [i.e. the Cross was found by St. Helen]. The Jews hung up Christ, they did of deeds the worst, they hid what they could not hide; so may this deed be no wise hidden through the holy rood of Christ. Amen."

Although there is nothing directly pagan in this, still it must be confessed that the spell, or whatever we may call it, finds itself in bad company. In the same collection we read, for instance, of a "holy salve" into which many herbs are introduced, but the butter which formed its principal ingredient must be obtained from "a cow all of one colour, so that she may be all red or white and without spots." Then you take a spoon and write on it "the holy names Matthew, Mark, Luke, John," and stir the butter with the spoon while you recite the psalm *Beati immaculati* (Ps. cxix, A.V.) as well as a number of prayers and a spell supposed to be Gaelic, but pronounced by scholars to be mere gibberish. When

the spell has been uttered nine times you must spit on the herbs and blow on them before the salve is ready for use.

A good deal of the medical treatment commonly employed in the Middle Ages seems to have been of this superstitious nature, but on the other hand there were undoubtedly ecclesiastics who spoke out strongly against the ideas which prevailed regarding witches, fairies and the use of such spells as those just mentioned. The treatise which St. Agobard, Archbishop of Lyons, wrote in the early part of the ninth century "Against the absurd opinion of the vulgar touching Hail and Thunder" was a notable pronouncement. He did not hesitate to say that "the wretched world lies now under the tyranny of foolishness; things are believed by Christians of such absurdity as no one ever would aforetime induce the heathen to believe who knew not the Creator of all." He attacked the credulity of those who put faith in the so-called *tempestarii* (weather wizards) and who applied to them to obtain rain or sunshine for the protection of their crops, attributing to them also the power of producing hailstorms or thunder when their purpose was vindictive. Agobard declares that "almost everyone in those regions, noble and simple, citizen and countryman, old and young, believes that storms are under human control, thus attributing the work of God to man." More especially interesting is the protest which he makes against the people's wrong-headedness in attributing all calamities directly to the devil or to commerce with the devil. It was not the devil's

work, he insisted, to cause plagues or tempests, but rather to instil superstitious ideas into men's minds from which all sorts of folly and injustice resulted. For example, he tells us, "A few years since when there was a murrain of oxen, a foolish story went abroad that Grimoald, Duke of Beneventum, had sent out men with powder to scatter over the fields and mountains, meadows and springs—by reason of which powder the oxen died. For this cause we have heard and seen that many persons were apprehended and some of them were put to death." Agobard asks why only the oxen and no other animals suffered, and further how the murrain could extend over so large a tract of land, where if all the inhabitants of Beneventum had been employed they could not possibly have sprinkled powder enough. "But what," he adds, "was most strange, the prisoners in some cases bore testimony against themselves, affirming that they had that powder and had scattered it. Thus did the devil receive power against them by the secret but righteous judgment of God, and so greatly did he prevail that they themselves were made false witnesses unto their own death." [1]

This is a curious anticipation of the "confessions" which puzzle us so much in the witch trials of the seventeenth century, for some of these last were apparently not elicited under torture.

There is marked sanity also in the "Canon Episcopi" of the ninth century in which certain prevalent beliefs regarding witches, some no doubt of

[1] See Migne, P.L., Vol. CIV, c. 158; and of R. Lane Poole, *Illustrations of the History of Medieval Thought*, pp. 57-9.

pagan origin, are specified and condemned. This pronouncement, which is echoed in the Penitentials and certain conciliar decrees, appears in Regino of Prüm (c. 900) in the following form:

> This also is not to be passed over that certain abandoned women turning aside to follow Satan, being seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and openly profess that in the dead of night they ride upon certain beasts along with the pagan goddess Diana, and a countless horde of women, and that in these silent hours they fly over vast tracts of country and obey her as their mistress, while on other nights they are summoned to pay her homage.

And then Regino goes on to remark that if it were only that the women themselves were deceived it would be a matter of little consequence, but that, unfortunately, an immense number of people believe these things to be true and, believing them, depart from the faith, so that practically speaking they fall into paganism. And on this account, he says: "It is the duty of priests earnestly to instruct the people that these things are absolutely untrue and that such imaginings are planted in the minds of misbelieving folk, not by a Divine spirit, but by the spirit of evil." So also Burchard, in his "Corrector" (*c.* 1020), rejects the possibility of many of the marvellous powers with which witches were popularly credited. Such were, for example, the nocturnal riding through the air, the changing of a person's disposition from love to hate, the control of thunder, rain and sunshine, the transformation of a man into an animal, and the intercourse of *incubi* and *succubæ* with human beings. Not

only the attempt to practise such things, but the very belief in their possibility, is treated by him as a sin for which the confessor must require his penitent to do a serious penance.

Perhaps the most notable of all the mediæval practices which were conspicuously tainted by superstition was that of the judicial ordeals in their different forms, whether by combat, or water, or the red-hot iron, or lots, or any of the other expedients. It is unquestionable that for many centuries they dominated the administration of justice—if indeed we can speak of the administration of justice when such methods were adopted for arriving at the truth—and it is equally beyond dispute that although, as Patetta (*Le Ordalie*) has proved, the majority of these tests were of pagan origin, the Church sanctioned them and in a measure adopted them for her own. Indeed, she even invented new ones. Agobard and some few other Christian teachers strongly opposed them and pointed out how unsound, both from a practical and a theological point of view, was the principle upon which such judgments were based, but centuries elapsed before the fourth Council of Lateran formulated a definite condemnation of this procedure. Moreover, even then trials by ordeal lingered on in the secular tribunals, lasting in certain forms and in particular countries well into the seventeenth century. But the subject is too vast to be dealt with here, and although it has now a copious literature, there are still many points upon which agreement has not been reached.

CHAPTER V

THE SUPERSTITIONS OF MODERN TIMES

THE Reformers were prone to congratulate themselves on the change which the suppression of Popery had effected by diverting the minds of men from their foolish credulities. Archbishop Sandys, preaching at York on the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's accession, reminded his hearers how "Christ at His first entry into the Temple, purged it by casting out the buyers and sellers," and then he went on to explain that:

> Our gracious Governor, following Christ's example, hath laboured most earnestly, first to cleanse the ground, and to purge this Church of England. She hath caused the stones to be picked out, brambles and briars to be pulled up, all rubbidge and whatsoever was hurtful to be removed, the den of thieves to be dispersed, buyers and sellers of popish trash, monks, friars, mass-mongers, with such like miscreants, to be hurled and whipped out, the stumbling stones of superstition, the baggage of man's traditions with all monuments of idolatry, vanity and popery, to be cast out of the house of God and vineyard of the Lord.

So far as concerns "our gracious Governor," Elizabeth herself, it is interesting to remember her relations with Dr. John Dee, the astrologer, who

was a beneficed clergyman of the Church of England. They lasted for forty years or more, and from the *Dictionary of National Biography* we may learn, among many other things, how

> In 1577 the courtiers were greatly alarmed by the appearance of a comet, and the Queen sent for Dee to Windsor, where she listened for three days to his discourse and speculations on the subject. On one occasion, apparently about this time, his services were hurriedly demanded in order to prevent the mischief to Her Majesty's person apprehended from a waxen image of her, with a pin stuck in its breast, which had been found in Lincoln's Inn Fields.[1]

It is probable that these delicate matters were not confided to Archbishop Sandys, and consequently he did not hesitate to assure his hearers that after the Elizabethan purging "no flock was better fed, no people were more instructed, no vineyard in the world was more beautiful or goodly to behold . . . The Gospel hath chased away walking spirits; it hath cast out devils, banished much ignorance and blindness, and put horrible blasphemy in a manner to flight." The Archbishop's satisfaction was certainly a little premature. Prosecutions for witchcraft which, in England and Scotland, were of rare occurrence before the Reformation, and still more rarely terminated in the death penalty, were multiplied a hundredfold during the reign of Elizabeth

[1] See also C. Fell Smith, *Dr. John Dee*, p. 22; where we are told: "This was only the first of many occasions when Dee had to allay the superstitious fright of Elizabeth and her courtiers."

and her immediate successors, while no scruple was felt about hanging by the dozen the incriminated beldames who were found guilty.[1]

Such superstitions as the witch-mania, common to Protestants and Catholics alike, led to more grievous tragedies than the mischief caused by the veneration of spurious relics or the employment of charms and periapts for the cure of diseases. That the use of spells and similar relics of paganism was not put an end to by the Reformation we have abundant reason to know. The collections of John Aubrey in the seventeenth century, and the information supplied in communications to *Notes and Queries* in more recent times, leave no doubt upon the point. There was even one form of the old trial by ordeal, the *judicium feretri* (judgment of the bier, or *Bahrgericht*, as the Germans called it) which survived in Scotland until the close of the seventeenth century. It was believed that if a murderer was made to touch the corpse of his victim, the wounds of the dead body bled afresh. As the poet Drayton phrased it:

> If the vile actor of the heinous deed
> Next the dead body happily be brought,
> Oft 'thath been proved the breathless corpse will bleed!

So in Shakespeare's Richard III, the Lady Anne, beside the bier of King Henry VI, exclaims:

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[1] Mr. C. L'Estrange Ewen has recently shown that in the Home Circuit alone (i.e. Essex, Hertford, Kent, Surrey, Sussex) 133 witches were sentenced under Elizabeth. All but a very few of these were certainly hanged. See his book *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (1929), pp. 102–6.

> Oh Gentlemen, see, see! dear Henry's wounds
> Open their congealed mouths and bleed afresh.
> Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity;
> For 'tis thy presence that exhales the blood
> From cold and empty veins where no blood dwells.

The strange thing was that this continued to be seriously believed, and in Scotland it was repeatedly appealed to in murder trials as a test of guilt or innocence. Pitcairn in his *Criminal Trials in Scotland* cites instances from 1628 to 1688. King James, Elizabeth's successor, who republished in England the *Dæmonologie* which he had previously written in his native country, therein affirms pontifically that "in a secret murder, if the dead carkasse be at any tyme thereafter handled by the murderer it will gush out of blood, as if the blood were crying to heaven for revenge of the murderer." Sir Thomas Browne, who was so unhesitating in his exposure of the vulgar errors of his contemporaries, did not apparently find anything to object to in this belief, while his friend Sir Kenelm Digby discoursed most seriously upon "the strange effect which is frequently seen in England, when, at the approach of the murderer, the slain body suddenly bleedeth afresh." [1]

As might be supposed, the belief in witchcraft which prevailed throughout England and Europe for more than a century after the accession of Elizabeth, and which was accepted unquestioningly by such

[1] *Works of Sir Thomas Browne* (Bohn's Edition, 1852), Vol. II, p. 467. In a note to Ch. 25 of *The Fair Maid of Perth*, Sir Walter Scott gives an account of the case of Phillip Standsfield in 1588.

intelligent men as the Sir Thomas Browne just named, proved a fruitful soil in which a variety of other superstitions were freely propagated. In Nathan Drake's *Shakespeare and his Times* there is an admirable chapter on this topic which reveals how little the alleged purging referred to by Archbishop Sandys had really effected. Thus when Joseph Hall, who later on was appointed Bishop of Exeter and then of Norwich, published in 1608 an imitation of Theophrastus under the title of *Characters of Virtue and Vice*, he gave prominence to what he presumably regarded as a type of human infirmity very prevalent in his day.

Superstition [he wrote] is godless religion, devout impiety. The superstitious is fond in observation, servile in fear: He worships God, but as he lists: he gives God what He asks not, more than He asks, and all but what he should give, and makes more sins than the ten commandements. This man dares not stir forth till his breast be crossed, and his face sprinkled. If but a hare cross him the way, he returns, or if his journey began unawares on the dismal day, or if he stumbled on the threshold. If he sees a snake unkilled, he fears a mischief: if the salt fall toward him, he looks pale and red, and is not quiet until one of the waiters has poured wine on his lap; and when he sneezeth thinks them not his friends that uncover not. In the morning he listens whether the crow crieth even or odd; and by that token presages of the weather. If he hear but a raven croak from the next roof, he makes his will and if a bittern should fly over his head by night. But if his troubled fancy should second his thoughts with the dream of a fair garden, or green rushes, or the salutation

of a dead friend, he takes leave of the world and says he cannot live. He will never set to sea but on a Sunday, neither ever goes without an *Ezra jacter* [this was a kind of Calendar] in his pocket. St. Paul's day and St. Swithin's, with the twelve [presumably the days between Christmas and Twelfth Night] are his oracles, which he dares believe against the almanack. When he lies sick on his death bed, no sin troubles him as that he did once eat flesh on a Friday—no repentance can expiate that—the rest need none. There is no dream of his without an interpretation, without a prediction, and if the event answers not his exposition, he expounds it according to the event. Every dark grove and pictured wall strikes him with an awful but carnal devotion. Old wives and stars are his counsellors; his night spell is his guard, and charms his physicians. He wears Paracelsian characters for the toothache and a little hallowed wax [presumably an *agnus dei*] is his antidote for all evils. . . . He knows not why, but his custom is to go a little about, and to leave the cross still on the right hand. . . . If he have done his task, he is safe, it matters not with what affection. Finally, if God would let him be the carver of his own obedience, He could not have a better subject; as he is, He cannot have a worse.

There is not much in this clever portrait which applies very directly to the observances of our own day. The type of character is, no doubt, the same, but the practices have changed, except, perhaps, that some of the old superstitions are maintained among the peasantry in remote country districts. The alarm over spilling the salt, however, still survives, and one occasionally meets people with whom such an accident appears to be a matter of real concern.

Dr. Wren, commenting on some observations of Sir Thomas Browne in his *Vulgar Errors*, remarks very sensibly that in many parts of the world salt is, and always has been, a costly thing and "therefore it is as ill caste on the ground as bread," and he notes that "in France for every bushel, they pay 40 shillings to the King and cannot have it elsewhere." Sir Thomas, on the other hand, describes "the falling of salt as an authentic presagement of ill luck." He even goes so far as to say that "not every temper can contemn it"; adding, however, that it was "held among the ancients to be a particular omination concerning the breach of friendship, rather than a general prognostic of future evil."

For all that, and though I speak with hesitation, I doubt whether this superstition regarding the spilling of salt is much older than the sixteenth century. In the well-known collection of small treatises which Dr. Furnivall some years ago edited for the Early English Text Society under the title *Manners and Meals of the Olden Time*, we have endless directions addressed to young people concerning proper behaviour at table. The salt cellar is constantly referred to, and the proper way of taking salt with a knife is insisted on, but there is, apparently, no warning anywhere given against upsetting the salt, or any mention of what is to be done if it happens. But at the close of the sixteenth century, the belief in this as an evil omen seems to have been general all over Europe. Reginald Scott, in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), declares that "amongst us there be manie women and effeminate men (manie papists

alwaies, as by their superstitions may appeare) that make great divinations upon the shedding of salt, wine, etc., and for the observation of daies and houres use as great witchcraft as in anie thing." Sir Thomas Browne was not a papist, neither was John Aubrey, but they testify to a general belief that ill fortune was likely to wait upon those in whose direction the salt chanced to be spilt. Leonardo da Vinci's great picture of the Last Supper was painted just before the year 1500, and it can hardly be by accident that the salt cellar standing in front of Judas has been overturned, though the salt is spilt on the table in a direction away from him. In the second part of Don Quixote (1615) the knight gravely discourses to Sancho Panza in Chapter 58 on omens, "for which," he says, "there are no rational grounds in nature and which ought to be esteemed and judged happy accidents by the wise. One of these superstitious folk, going out of his house betimes in the morning, meets a friar of the blessed order of St. Francis, and, as if he'd met a griffin, turns back, and goes home again. Another upsets the salt on the table-cloth, and thereupon is sadly cast down himself, as if we could expect nature to give tokens of coming disasters by things of such little moment as these." A hundred years later, in Gay's fable, "The Farmer's Wife and the Raven," the wife accounts for her tears by saying:

> Alas! you know the cause too well;
> The salt is spilt, to me it fell.
> Then, to contribute to my loss,
> My knife and fork were laid across.

Pennant towards the close of the same century speaks of this superstition as very common in Germany, and remarks that the recognized antidote was to fling some salt over the shoulder into the fire. Finally I may quote a letter in *Notes and Queries* (2 Sept. 1922) where we read: "A friend of mine tells me that in her family in her childhood's days, not twenty years ago, the spiller of the salt, in casting a pinch over the left shoulder, had to repeat the formula 'go to the devil' three times, though the expression was otherwise absolutely taboo in the house."

Although many of these minor superstitions have a much longer ancestry behind them than can easily be traced, still some must be of comparatively modern introduction. Gay, as just quoted, alludes to the disaster portended by the knife and fork being "laid across." Now table-forks, as a utensil supplied to each guest, were not known in England before the end of the sixteenth century. Tom Coryat, "the Odcombian leg-stretcher," who himself brought back a private table-fork from Italy, is explicit upon the point. But it was barely a hundred years from the time when Coryat was bantered by his English friends as *furcifer* (fork-bearer, the Latin word also means felon) that Addison in an early *Spectator*, wrote as follows on some popular superstitions of his day:

In the midst of these my musings, my hostess desired me to reach her a little salt upon the point of my knife, which I did in such a trepidation and hurry of obedience that I let it drop by the way, at which she immediately

started and said it fell towards her. Upon this I looked very blank, and observing the concern of the whole table, began to consider myself, with some confusion, as a person that had brought disaster on the family. The lady, however, recovering herself after a little space said to her husband with a sigh, "My dear, misfortunes never come single. . . . Do you not remember that the pigeon-house fell the very afternoon that our careless wench spilt the salt upon the table?" "Yes," said he, "my dear, and the next post brought us an account of the battle of Almanza." The reader may guess at the figure I made, after having done all this mischief. I dispatched my dinner as soon as I could, with my usual taciturnity when, to my utter confusion, the lady seeing me quitting my knife and fork and laying them across one another on my plate, desired me that I would take them out of that figure and place them side by side. What the absurdity was which I had committed I did not know, but I suppose that there was some traditionary superstition in it; and therefore in obedience to the lady of the house, I disposed of my knife and fork in the parallel lines, which is the figure I shall always lay them in for the future, though I know not any reason for it.

There can be no doubt that the point last referred to is also much insisted on in France. Letters addressed to the *Intermédiaire* comment satirically upon the *influence funeste de trouver placé un couvert en croix*, and the belief that it is unlucky to cross one's knife and fork has not yet died out in England. The ninth series of *Notes and Queries* had many communications on the subject.

But if any superstition concerning knives and forks must, of necessity, be relatively modern, the

same may also be said of those which in any way have reference to umbrellas. Both Coryat and Sir Fynes Morison refer to their use in Italy as something which was entirely new to them, and the latter, for example, remarks: "In hot regions, to avoid the beams of the sun, in some places (as in Italy) they carry umbrels, a thing like a little canopy over their heads; but a learned physician told me that the use of these was dangerous, because they gather the heat in a pyramidall point, and thence cast it down upon the head, except they know how to carry them for avoiding that danger." In England umbrellas were not introduced before the eighteenth century, and at first only for ladies. Hence such a superstition as the common belief that to open an umbrella within the house is a presage of disaster, or that to lay an umbrella on the table will be followed by a quarrel, must be of modern growth.

The same conclusion imposes itself in the case of the still more widely spread conviction that to break a looking-glass is ominous of serious trouble to the owner or to others. Metal mirrors, of course, have been known from very remote ages, but though a few glass mirrors began to be made in Venice in the fourteenth century, such articles were very costly, and it was not until three or four hundred years later that looking-glasses came into common use in England, France or Germany. "*Tout le monde sait; une glace cassée, sept ans de malheur,*" so we find a journalist writing in the *Figaro* some fifty years ago. The same belief, if I am not mistaken, is more than once alluded to in the Diary of Marie Bashkirtseff.

But it was not confined to townsfolk and educated people. We learn that it was widely prevalent in Cornwall and Somersetshire, and that this same term of seven years' trouble was there supposed to follow upon the breaking of a mirror. Elsewhere such accidents were considered to portend the loss of the owner's dearest friend, or again, the death of someone in the house. A case was even reported in 1855 of a servant who gave notice because a looking-glass had been broken in the family, and the maid feared, if she stayed, that the penalty might fall upon herself, though she had nothing to do with the breaking.

Whether such superstitions date back to primitive times, or are of comparatively recent growth, it is impossible, in the vast majority of cases, to furnish any satisfactory explanation of how they came into being. Probably most of them started by some quite fortuitous coincidence. A man, let us say, brings peacocks' feathers or a big branch of hawthorn bloom (may) into the house, and shortly afterwards some catastrophe happens. If he is superstitiously minded it occurs to him that there may be some causal connection between the two, and he, as likely as not, imparts his suspicion to his friends. They are consequently on the *qui vive* to notice anything untoward which may follow upon a similar occasion, regardless of the fact that in any week of the year some one or other of a score of unpleasant things is likely to befall almost everybody. Even a single other case of a calamity great or small, occurring after may or peacocks' feathers have been

brought inside the house, will be sufficient to convince them that such proceedings are attended with bad luck. "Men marke when they hit," says Bacon, "but never marke when they misse." All the instances which confirm the theory are noticed, but no one pays any attention to those in which it fails. There can, I think, be little doubt that a vast number of things which are popularly supposed to be lucky or unlucky have acquired their reputation in this way. It is unlucky to see the new moon through glass or reflected in the water; it is unlucky to burn the wood of an elder tree in the fire; it is unlucky to cut an onion in half; it is unlucky to turn a mattress on Friday; it is unlucky to light three cigarettes from the same match, or to be the first to enter a new building or to be the first to cross over a bridge, etc. etc. On the other hand it is lucky to see two magpies or four, it is a sign of good luck if a dark man is the first to enter the house after midnight on New Year's Eve; it is lucky for a baby to be born with a caul; stones which have a hole through them are lucky and serve as a charm against witches; it is lucky to find a spray of white heather; it is lucky to touch the hump of a hump-back; it is lucky to eat a mince-pie in a different house each day between Christmas and the Epiphany; and what is more surprising, it is lucky to dream of the devil. But there are a thousand other popular axioms which are just as much, or as little, deserving of credit.

Attempts have often been made to provide a rational explanation of one or other of these folk sayings and practices of the crowd. I must confess

that very few such conjectures seem to me in the least plausible. Take, for example, the custom of touching wood when one congratulates oneself on some piece of good fortune. It has been suggested that the usage dates from the time when the oak, the ash and the rowan were held sacred to the gods of the heathen. The oak, we are told, was the tree most nearly associated with Zeus, the supreme god of the Aryans, and so forth. Others suppose that the custom is a survival of an appeal to some relic of the true cross, while yet others remind us of the children's game "Ticky, Ticky, touch wood." What is certain is that in France and elsewhere, it was hardly less common in similar circumstances to touch iron instead of wood,[1] while everyone knows the alternative which has come to us from Germany of exclaiming "*Unberufen*" (i.e. *Ich will das Gegenteil nicht berufen*) or "*Unbeschrieen*." All that one can say is that these things represent an attempt to propitiate the ill will of the higher powers in case we should have offended by our boastfulness. The practice is no doubt prompted by the same instinct which is depicted in the Greek legend of Polycrates who, to avert the jealousy of the gods, threw his ring, his most precious possession, into the sea.

[1] In his volume *Taboo*, an expansion of a chapter in the first edition of *The Golden Bough*, Sir J. G. Frazer (p. 255) comments on the use of iron "as a protective charm" by Scotch fishermen and others. When the fishermen were at sea, he tells us, "if one of them happened to take the name of God in vain, the first man who heard him called out 'cauld airn,' at which every man of the crew grasped the nearest bit of iron and held it between his hands for a while."

So again the superstition connected with passing under a ladder has been accounted for in various ways. Some suggest that it has to do with the fact that a felon, condemned to be hanged, was turned off the ladder. Others refer us to a picture of the descent from the Cross in Siena in which the devil is depicted trying to upset the ladder. Sir James Frazer takes us back to the pyramids and to the texts which mention the ladder by which the Egyptian kings climbed to the sky. Elsewhere mention is made of miniature ladders placed in people's graves to assist them in the next world. We are also told that the idea of the devil lurking beneath the ladder is confirmed by the practice of those who when obliged to pass under a ladder make the sign of the cross. However much learning may have been brought to bear in these conjectures, the popular reluctance to face the ladder ordeal had probably, in the first instance, no more romantic origin than the fear that the ladder might slip, or that paint or whitewash might be dropped from above.

Of all modern superstitions, hardly any is taken so seriously as that which forbids thirteen people to sit down to dinner together. Even the most strong-minded hostess will have recourse to extraordinary expedients to prevent this contingency arising. There seems no reason to doubt that the prejudice originated in the fact that there were thirteen at table at the Last Supper. Nothing would suggest that this number was accounted unlucky amongst the ancients, but the fear of forming one of a company of thirteen was certainly widespread in the seven-

teenth century. Fénelon in his earliest printed book speaks of people turning pale on finding themselves so circumstanced, and a song of Béranger, "Treize à Table," shows that the superstition was not entirely ignored even among the boon companions of the Revolutionary epoch:

> Dieux! mes amis, nous sommes treize à table
> Et devant moi, le sel est répandu.
> Nombre fatal! Présage épouvantable!
> La Mort accourt; je frissonne éperdu.

It is, I submit, instructive to notice that from this beginning the number thirteen has itself fallen into quite unmerited disrepute. Many people are nowadays unwilling to take a house or a flat which bears such a stigma, and enterprising builders and hotel proprietors not infrequently make arrangements to suppress the number so that one passes straight from 12 to 14; No. 13, if it exists at all, being allotted to some quite different purpose. Dr. M. R. James, the Provost of Eton, has included in his *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* a thrilling tale which incorporates this feature and which itself bears the title "No. 13." Further, the 13th day of the month has inherited in some measure the disfavour which belongs to other thirteens. No man of our time has given proof of a more reckless daring in every kind of physical risk to life and limb than the conjurer Houdini, but we are told that he would not perform any of his more dangerous feats upon a Friday if it happened to coincide with the 13th of the month. What makes this particular superstition the more

remarkable is the fact that Harry Houdini was a Jew and the son of a Rabbi. Moreover, he never professed Christianity or dissociated himself formally from the religious practices of his forefathers.

Hardly anyone will venture to doubt that the superstitious observance of Friday as a *dies nefastus* was brought about by the fact that, throughout the Christian world, the day is honoured as a day of abstinence and as a sort of weekly commemoration of our Lord's passion. Even in the time of John Aubrey it was held in many parts of England to be an unlucky day to go fishing, to start a journey, to enter upon a new situation, to turn a bed, to be born, to be married, or to change one's place of residence. The fact that Henri IV of France found Friday an exceptionally lucky day does not detract from the general impression of mankind to the contrary. What is certain is that down to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the reluctance to undertake any sort of new experience on a Friday went on steadily increasing. Official statistics in Paris about 1869 showed that on Fridays there was a notable diminution in the number of those who travelled by rail, and that on this day, as compared with the other weekdays, the omnibus receipts were very much less. In England the unpopularity of Friday, if one may so describe it, showed itself chiefly in its relation to matrimony. A Registrar-General who in the last century took the trouble to compute the relative frequency of weddings on the different days of the week, stated in his official report that in the Midlands of England not 2 per

cent of the marriages were celebrated on a Friday, whereas 52 per cent were celebrated on Sunday, and 51 per cent took place on a Monday. Strange to say, the prejudice against Friday for weddings does not, apparently, extend to Scotland, and formerly at Glasgow the greater number of marriages were celebrated on that day, while on Sunday, practically speaking, there were none at all. On the other hand, the reluctance in Scotland to change one's abode on a Friday, or to go to sea on that day, was, at one time, very remarkable. There is a well-authenticated story of a woman, who, having been ordered by the Court to give up her premises at a certain date, preferred to be sent to prison rather than obey the injunction. It afterwards turned out that her objection was not to leaving the house she was in, but only to having to transport her belongings and begin her tenancy of a new flat on a Friday. For the Scotswoman, "flitting" on that day of the week has long been absolutely taboo.

Whatever difference of opinion there may have been regarding Friday as a suitable day to be married on, it is clear that a considerable amount of prejudice still exists against weddings in May. Some people seek to trace it as far back as the time of Ovid, who registers the popular belief that only worthless brides were married in May—"*mense malas maio nubere volgus ait.*" There does not, however, seem to be a shadow of evidence that there has been any continuity in this persuasion. We hear nothing of it in the Middle Ages. On the other hand; such occasions as weddings, funerals and christenings,

which become the occasion of much gossip among those who participate in the function, are likely to be not only conservative in retaining old superstitions but also prolific in creating new ones. It is impossible to develop the theme here. Whether the scattering of rice (formerly it was often wheat) or confetti, has anything whatever to do with the Roman *confarreatio* cannot be determined, for here again there is no evidence of continuous observance. Similarly, though we may find a good deal in the Old Testament (e.g. Ruth iv. 7; Deut. xxv. 9, etc.) as well as in certain Teutonic marriage observances, which seems to attach special significance to the removal or delivery of a shoe, there is nothing to explain the rite which now so commonly attends the departure of the bride and bridegroom. Still, it has long been customary to throw a shoe for luck, and a correspondent in *Notes and Queries* relates an amusing incident of the early years of the last century. A farmer going in to Norwich to buy a lottery ticket instructed his wife to "trull her left shoe arter him" as he rode off. Before he was more than a few yards from the house he incautiously looked back to see whether his behest was attended to, and received the vigorously thrown missile full in the face. But the ticket he bought that day won him a prize of £600, and a black eye seemed a small price to pay for the luck which had come in its train. I am inclined to believe that the throwing of a shoe for luck was older than its association with weddings. We have a mention of the practice in John Heywood's *Epigrams upon Proverbs* (1562), where he

says, "Nowe for good lucke caste an olde shoe after mee." It would be natural enough, if this were an observance in common use, to have recourse to the rite on the departure of the married pair.

In a little book like the present, it is impossible to glance at even the fiftieth part of the superstitions still current, especially those which linger in out-of-the-way country districts. Each locality has its own usages, and often enough, an observance which in one country, or province, is regarded as lucky, is looked upon elsewhere as pregnant with disaster. Not infrequently also the most beneficent properties are attributed to things which in themselves one would think calculated to excite horror. Nothing, seemingly, is more prized by superstitious people than a portion of the rope with which a man has been hanged. Immense trouble and risk were often incurred to secure possession of such objects. Dr. Pettigrew records that when Mooney, a notorious highwayman, and others in his company were hanged at Bristol in 1752, "a fellow was like to have been killed in mounting the gallows to take away the ropes which were left after the malefactors were cut down. A young woman came fifteen miles for the sake of the rope from Mooney's neck, which was given to her, it being apprehended that the halter of an executed person will charm away the ague and perform other cures." [1] A similar efficacy was attributed to the hand of the executed criminal himself. Less than a hundred years ago when Crowley was hanged at Warwick for murder (this

[1] *On Superstitions of Medicine and Surgery*, p. 68.

was in 1845) we are told that "scarcely was he dead than the scaffold was crowded with women afflicted with goitre or white swellings in the knee, upon which the dead man's hand was passed to and fro, 'for the benefit of the hangman.'"[1] "Hangman's rope," we are assured, was particularly prized by gamblers. For example, the Abbé J. B. Thiers in his *Traité des Superstitions* at the end of the seventeenth century informs us that "there are people silly enough to imagine that they will be lucky at the gaming table and will always win, so long as they have about them a piece of the cord by which a man has been hanged, or a spray of four-leaved clover, or the heart of a swallow"; and another writer has left us the picture of a French nobleman who, as he gambled, kept putting his finger and thumb into the snuff-box which he carried. It did not contain snuff, but only a fragment of cord which he had purchased from the executioner.

Many of these relatively modern superstitions seem curiously far-fetched, especially perhaps those relating to very innocent actions which are supposed to entail a dreadful penalty in the form of quarrels and loss of friends. You must not leave a pair of bellows, or a pair of new boots, upon the table, otherwise there will be a fight in the house. You must not wash your hands in the water already used by another person, or else you will fall out with him. The only way to avert this is to make the sign of the cross over the water. And, of course, you must not make your friend a present of a knife if you do

[1] F. T. Elworthy, *Horns of Honour*, p. 193.

not wish to lose his friendship. What you have to do is to receive a small coin from him in exchange, so that the proceeding may wear the semblance of a commercial transaction.

In very few of these curious beliefs can one trace even the remote possibility of justification by causes unexplained. The experience of simple folk does not often hit upon truths which science has failed to recognize. According to popular belief a "sty" on the eyelid can be cured by rubbing it with a piece of gold. This persuasion is at least three centuries old, for Fletcher refers to it in his play, *The Mad Lover*. We most of us, as children, have had experience of the treatment, and in De Quincey's autobiography one may read, "I knew that a styan upon the eyelid could be easily reduced by the slight application of any golden trinket." Is this so? There may, conceivably, be virtue in the remedy, but it is difficult to see why a piece of gold should bring relief where, apparently, a piece of silver fails. So, again, we cannot positively say that there is no virtue in May-dew. Mr. Pepys' wife went to Woolwich on May 20th, 1667, to stay the night and gather May-dew early in the morning, "which," says her husband, "Mr. Turner taught her is the only thing in the world to wash her face with." She went out again for the same purpose in May 1669, rising before 3 a.m. All which seems in some measure an anticipation of Pfarrer Kneipp's method of treatment at Wörishofen. We also hear, about a century ago, of crowds of London people going out to bathe their faces in May-dew under the idea that

it would make them beautiful as well as healthy. The early rising and the fresh air may have done them good, but what about the May-dew? Another strange belief, prevalent among sea-fishermen, is that mackerel exposed to the rays of the moon become poisonous. A friend of mine assures me that her father having eaten freshly caught mackerel which had not been protected from the moonbeams during the night, became seriously ill and remained a firm believer in the reality of this danger for the rest of his life.

How little the four hundred years which have elapsed since the great upheaval of the sixteenth century have done to eliminate superstition must surely have been brought home to most of us during the Great War. The prophecies of "Brother Johannes" so widely circulated in France and England; the "prayer-shop" in Regent Street, where, for a small consideration of from two to five guineas, one might purchase immunity for combatants exposed to the effects of high explosives; the amulets and mascots which have ever since found a vogue which had no parallel before the world welter, the extravagance of endless devotional leaflets, referring for example to the copies of a writing miraculously deposited in the days of Charlemagne upon the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; the flood of spiritualistic communications purporting to be transmitted from the world beyond the grave—surely all these things must bring home to us the conclusion that man cannot easily shake himself free from irrational beliefs which the common feeling of

the more educated is prone to characterize as superstitious. We need not attempt to decide in each case whether such a designation is justly applied. Few will dispute the fact that these credulities are somewhat dishonouring to human nature and that it is a moral duty to resist them with all our force. Nevertheless, there is also a more favourable side, and even so severe a censor as Sir James Frazer admits that some pleas may be presented in their defence. Superstition, he thinks, has been a prop of Government by inculcating a deep veneration for the Governors; it has been a prop of private property by inculcating a fear of its violation; it has been a prop of marriage by creating a dread of violating the traditional rules of sexual morality; and it has also been a prop to the security of human life by inspiring fear of the ghosts of the murdered dead. But the Christian may add to these the consideration that superstition has often helped to keep alive the belief in a hereafter, and that it has impressed upon mankind the conviction that there is something more to live for than what is found in the material world around us.

If I may venture to formulate any conclusion as the result of this imperfect survey, it would be that the moral import of superstitious practices in the times in which we live cannot quite be estimated by the standards which prevailed in earlier ages. A world which for the first time is learning faith in the Father, Son and Holy Ghost is different from a world which after centuries of acceptance is losing

its hold of that faith. The proportion of actual worshippers of the one God at the present day may be no greater than it was fifteen hundred years ago, but, despite the falling away of vast multitudes, Christianity is still in possession. In the Roman Empire of St. Augustine's time paganism was in possession. The only religious ideas of the bulk of the people were centred in polytheism and magic, and these things were still realities to them. On the other hand in a social order which is falling away from Christ new-fangled creeds possess little reality and no certainty. They hardly even claim it. In spite of a vigorous propaganda, they remain just speculations.

This, I submit, is a point of considerable importance. Even when the days of active persecution were over the catechumen who at baptism professed belief in "one God, the Father Almighty, and in his only Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, and the Holy Ghost, Giver of life to all creation, the Trinity equal in Godhead, in one Lord and one Kingdom and one Faith and one Baptism, in the holy Church Catholic and in life eternal" [1] had taken a tremendous step. It was no mere opinion which he had embraced. If he treated it as an opinion and coquetted with the superstitions he had left behind, his Christianity was vain. There was no place for any sort of syncretism, for any

[1] I take this from what has recently been shown to be the earliest Church Order and identified with Hippolytus in the third century. See Dom R. H. Connolly, *The So-called Egyptian Church Order*, in Cambridge *Texts and Studies* (VIII, 4), p. 134.

blending of ideas or fusion of religious systems, amid the conditions which prevailed for more than a thousand years after the coming of Christ. It was, beyond all doubt, the realisation of this which rendered the theological controversies in the early Church so bitter. It was this which made the Fathers, as well as the ecclesiastical teachers of the Carolingian period, so fierce in their denunciation of practices which veiled an appeal to the gods or demons of polytheism. The Apostle of the Gentiles had set the example of outspoken language: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not fellowship in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not fellowship in the body of Christ? We many are one bread, one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider Israel according to the flesh—have not they who eat the sacrifices fellowship with the altar? What then do I mean? That the idol offering is anything? Or that the idol is anything? (No;) but that what the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils and not to God; and I would not have you enter the fellowship of devils. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of devils. Or are we to provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?"[1]

This was the inherent malice of those forms of superstition with which the Church during the first thousand years of Christianity was primarily brought into contact. They "provoked the Lord to

[1] 1 Cor. x. 14–22, Westminster Version.

jealousy," they involved a virtual apostasy from the Faith. The superstition which we see around us now is more venial and less harmful. No doubt in essence it remains always the same. It is still a perversion of the reverence due to the Almighty. But whereas in earlier ages the forms of superstition most in evidence, and most unequivocally condemned, were those which paid worship to a wrong object—to idols, for example, instead of the one true God—in our day we have mainly to deplore abuses of the religious sentiment which are wrong in their manner of expression, and which are irrational rather than impious or profane. God is not so directly dishonoured by the devotee who to heal his bodily infirmities swallows little slips of paper inscribed with the name of a favourite patron saint, who builds his hopes of salvation on some extravagant practice of piety or spurious indulgence, who will not drive in a motor-car without his mascot, or who consults an astrologer before embarking on a journey. The habit of mind which has recourse to such practices is unhealthy, and the culprit is morally guilty in the measure in which he disobeys the voice of conscience, but genuine ignorance, the prevalence of bad example and the want of any serious purpose may often be pleaded in excuse. What is most to be deplored in the majority of such cases is the neglect to think things out and to adjust life in accord with religious principle. The superstitious man at the present day is for the most part a weakling who drifts with the prevailing fashion, who is credulous of any utterance which he has heard a

sufficient number of times repeated by those around him, and who in religious matters gambles upon what presents itself to his mind as a chance which, at little cost to himself, may possibly turn in his favour. The general decay of faith has left men ready to take all chances; but if faith in God is weak, faith in mascots and fortune-tellers is even less assured, and these things for the most part are not taken very seriously. The worst evil of superstition is that it leads to a neglect of such genuine virtues as fortitude, intellectual honesty and trust in God, it undermines the true religious sense, and it is unfortunately in a high degree contagious—contagious as cowardice and selfishness and hysteria are always contagious.

Imprimi potest si iis ad quos pertinet videbitur Henricus Keane S.J., Præp. Prov. Angliæ.

Nihil obstat: Edwardus T. Mahoney, S.Th.D., Censor Deputatus.

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